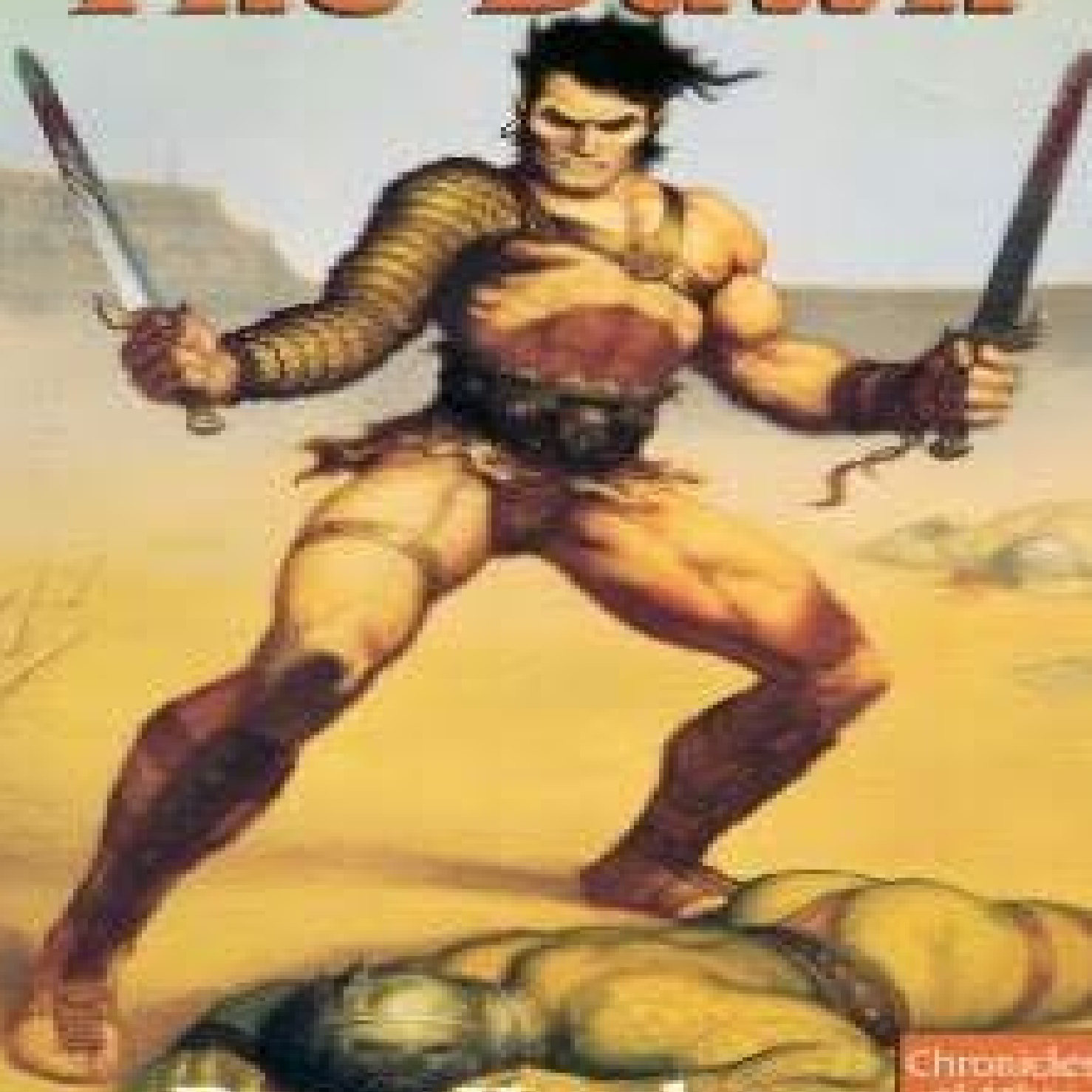


THE DARKNESS

The Darkness Before The Dawn



Ryan Hughes

**Chronicles
of Athos
Book 3**

THE DARKNESS BEFORE THE DAWN

**Chronicles of Athas
Book Two**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Dedication</u>
<u>Chapter One</u>
<u>Chapter Two</u>
<u>Chapter Three</u>
<u>Chapter Four</u>
<u>Chapter Five</u>
<u>Chapter Six</u>
<u>Chapter Seven</u>
<u>Chapter Eight</u>
<u>Chapter Nine</u>
<u>Chapter Ten</u>
<u>Chapter Eleven</u>
<u>Chapter Twelve</u>
<u>About the Author</u>

For the Thursday night brainstorming gang with special thanks to Steve and
Chris York for the piles of bones.

CHAPTER ONE

The air was thick with the smell of burning caravan. The enormous house-sized wagon had met its end in the deep desert, and wood, leather, dead bodies, and anything else not valuable enough to carry away now joined together in a crackling bonfire. Athas's coppery sun, slipping behind the western horizon, tinted the roiling column of smoke bloody red, sending a signal across dozens of miles of desert: Here there be death.

The fifty or so Jura-Dai elves who cavorted before the flaming wreckage of the enormous wooden merchant wagon didn't seem to care. Their brightly colored cloaks and shirts and loose, blousy pants flapped gaily as they spun and danced in the flickering light, and their voices rose in laughter and song. Of course, they were the victors. The losers—slave runners who had made the mistake of taking one of the tribe captive—were inside the caravan, the smoke of their flesh and bones adding to the wagon's in a single enormous funeral pyre. The few who hadn't died in battle had been driven along with the slaves the elves had freed out into the desert to fend for themselves.

Jedra, a half-elf who had been imprisoned along with the Jura-Dai tribesman, watched the party from partway up the flank of a nearby dune. He could feel the heat of the flames on his face even there, but he was out of the elves' way. That seemed safest, even though he and the human woman, Kayan, had been invited to travel through the desert with the tribe in repayment for their help in psionically guiding the rescue.

Kayan sat beside him on the dune, her elbows on her knees and her rounded chin resting in her hands. The ends of her brown hair shifted in the breeze, but after eight days in the hold of the slave wagon the shoulder-length strands were too sweaty and greasy to be lifted much by a mere air current. Her skin was smudged with dirt and soot as well, but Jedra didn't care. They shared a bond much deeper than the mere physical; he had only to close his eyes to see how beautiful she was.

"The elves certainly seem uninhibited," she said.

Below, some of the elven warriors stood only a few feet from the flames, their backs to the watchers on the dune, but from their stance it was obvious that they were urinating on the fire. Or trying to. The rest of the tribe—women and children as well—were cheering and heckling as first one man, then another, leaped back from the intense heat before he could accomplish the job. A few of the more inebriated managed weak trickles before they, too, were forced back, finally leaving a single warrior standing before the burning wagon. He was tall, and burly for an elf. His only clothing was a pair of bright red pants, and his glistening back rippled with muscle as he calmly went about his business, then buttoned his pants and turned around to receive riotous applause. Jedra noticed with chagrin that the elf had more hair on his chest than he himself did. Half-human ancestry evidently didn't give him the advantage even there.

"He's one of the ones who freed us," Jedra said. "He fought all the way through the caravan to the slave hold. I guess he's entitled to cut loose a little."

"Mmm-hmm."

The elves had appropriated a haunch of meat from the wagon before torching it. It looked like either a leg of mekillot or maybe a whole ink; whichever it was, they had tied it on a spit and were slowly roasting it beside the fire.

The champion elf was impatient, though. He swaggered over to the meat and carved off a fist-sized hunk of it with his sword, then skewered the flesh on the end of the blade and held it closer to the flame. Jedra winced. He could almost feel the heat curling the hair on the elf's arm.

Almost? Suddenly he realized that he *was* feeling it. His wild psionic talent had linked him empathically with the elf, and Jedra was feeling the other man's pain. He hastily broke contact. The elf suddenly jerked his hand back as his own mind bore the entire sensation again, and the other elves laughed. Fortunately nobody—not even the warrior—suspected Jedra's role in his embarrassment. Jedra vowed to keep a tighter rein on his talent, though. He had known for only a few days that he had any psionic ability at

all, and he was still learning how to use it. He could get himself into trouble very easily if he wasn't careful.

The breeze shifted, and the aroma of cooking meat drifted across the dune. Kayan's stomach rumbled. She smiled and patted herself on the bare skin between her halter top and breechcloth. "I could certainly use a few bites of that," she said.

Jedra nodded. "Me, too. That slop they served us in the wagon was even less than I used to get on the streets in Urik."

"It was far less than what a templar's assistant eats," Kayan said, a note of sadness in her voice. Her former life had gone up in flames as surely as the caravan before her. Born into a noble's household, she had become a psionic healer for the templars, a position she'd held until she crossed someone in power. Overnight she'd found herself in the hold of a slave wagon bound for Tyr. The elves had rescued her from that fate, but even so she would no longer eat good meals every day, nor live in a spacious apartment near the sorcerer-king's palace, nor help control the resources of an entire city.

Jedra's life had changed also, but not to the same extent. He had been one of link's myriad street people before he had been enslaved; he had always foraged for his meals and shelter. Here in the desert both were more scarce, but even that would not be true tonight.

Standing, he said, "I think we should take the elves up on their offer before they decide to withdraw it."

Kayan held out a hand for him to help her to her feet. "Yes," she said, brushing the sand off her breechcloth, "I suppose even associating with boisterous elves is better than starving to death."

They descended the sandy slope hand-in-hand, using one another for support, obviously not accustomed to desert travel. The loose sand rubbed uncomfortably between their sandal straps and their feet, and Kayan kept stopping to shake it out. It wasn't so bad when they reached level ground.

They approached the party with caution. They had watched the elves chase away other survivors from the caravan when they drew too close.

Even with their invitation, they weren't sure how they would be received. They were right to be cautious; the elves looked at them suspiciously and whispered among themselves in their own language, and three warriors—one with a sword and two with longbows held ready—moved to intercept them. Before the warriors reached them, however, Galar, the elf who had been enslaved with them, spotted them and held out his arms, saying in the common tongue, “Aha, my friends, you have decided to join our celebration!”

“We don't want to intrude,” Jedra said diplomatically, “but the smell of food has overcome us.”

“Intrude! Impossible!” Galar spoke loudly for all to hear. Shaking his head until his reddish-blond hair fell into his eyes and had to be shaken out again, he said, “It was you who led the tribe to us, and who fought the slave master with your minds. Without your psionic talent I would still be in the slave hold, another day closer to Tyr, and the Jura-Dai would still thirst for their revenge. You cannot intrude upon a celebration held in your honor.” He reached down for Kayan's arm and led her into the midst of the elves, calling out, “Let's show our friends the hospitality of the Jura-Dai. A pint of mead for each of them, and the best cut from the roast. And if we don't hear a song about their exploits by the end of the feast, I'll have the bard's head on a pike!”

Galar's enthusiasm amused the other elves—save for the bard, whose eyes bulged as he realized he now had to come up with an amusing ditty or face the taunts of his drunken tribe. Jedra caught his eye and shrugged in silent apology for his inconvenience, but the bard didn't look mollified.

Jedra didn't have time to worry; within seconds a smiling elf maiden shoved a mug of mead into his hands, slopping a fourth of it over his forearm in the process, and Galar led him on toward the crowd gathered near the cooking spit. Jedra's mouth watered at the wonderful aroma that wafted from the dripping carcass. Inix, it looked like from his closer vantage.

The warrior who had been roasting his own meat had taken refuge behind a shield and edged up close to the burning wagon. The gobbet of

steak impaled on his sword hissed and sputtered in the flame, and the warrior would occasionally pull it back to take a bite from it before thrusting it out into the fire again. He scowled when he noticed Jedra watching him, until Jedra raised his mug in toast to his benefactor. Then the elf nodded curtly and turned back to his show of bravado.

“That’s Sahalik,” Galar said softly as he led them onward. “He’s our best warrior, and next in line to be chief.”

Jedra glanced over at the current chief, a battle-scarred elf a foot shorter than Sahalik and thirty pounds lighter. He walked with a limp and his face bore a haunted look, as if he knew his time was almost up. “Ah,” Jedra said, unwilling to gamble on a more informative reply.

What’s Sahalik’s problem? Kayan mindsent to Jedra.

Elves don’t like half-elves, he sent back, trying not to speak aloud at the same time. He was still unused to their mental rapport. *They think we’re impure.*

Oh, great, Kayan sent. Then she shrugged. *Well, at least I don’t have to worry about the men here, then.*

Jedra laughed. *Where do you think half-elves come from? Elves don’t mind associating with human women, so long as the humans don’t expect their children to be accepted by the tribe.*

Oh.

“What do you find funny?” Galar asked, and Jedra realized he had laughed aloud.

Thinking fast, he said, “Oh, just the sudden reversal of fortune. A week ago I would never have guessed I’d be dining with elves by the wreckage of the slave caravan that was taking me to Tyr.”

A murmur of laughter spread among everyone within earshot, and Galar explained. “You city dwellers expect too much certainty in your lives. We nomads of the desert know that life is harsh and unpredictable. We have learned to deal with each day as it comes to us. We have a saying: ‘Hope for the best, but expect the worst; that way all your surprises will be pleasant.’”

An elf maiden wrapped in a bright blue cloak added, “We also say, ‘Live for today—tomorrow will be trouble enough when it arrives.’”

“Wise counsel,” Jedra said. “I’ll try to remember it while I travel the desert.”

“Oh, that’s nothing. I could teach you all sorts of things,” she said, batting her eyelashes and thrusting her hips to the side. “I like ’em young and naive.”

Jedra blushed while the elves laughed, and the woman said, “Come on, honey, let’s get you and your friend here some food before you faint on us. There’s plenty of night left for education.”

I bet there is, Kayan sent sarcastically. *If you touch her, I’ll—*

Don’t worry, Jedra told her. *She’s just playing with me. I’ll get away before anything comes of it.*

You’d better, Kayan warned.

Jedra felt a mixture of alarm and security at Kayan’s obvious jealousy. They had known each other for only a week, and though they’d become close friends while chained side-by-side in the slave hold, even their mental communion couldn’t guarantee commitment now that they were free.

Gratefully, Jedra let the elf woman carve a slice of roast for him from the spitted inix. Food would still many tongues, at least for a while. And the woman was right, there was plenty of night left. Anything could happen to distract her.

He watched her prepare the food for him. She laid the slice of meat on a slab of unleavened bread and smothered it in some kind of shredded, pickled vegetable, then folded the whole works over and handed it to him, both ends dripping fat and pickle juice. Jedra looked at it dubiously, but when he bit into it he nearly melted.

Wow! he sent to Kayan, then when he’d chewed and swallowed he echoed the sentiment aloud. “This is wonderful!”

“It should be,” the elf woman said. “It was all headed for Kalak’s table before we appropriated it from the wagon.”

Jedra shuddered to think that he was robbing Tyr's powerful sorcerer-king of his dinner, but then the elven part of him evidently accepted the advice he'd been given and he closed his eyes and savored the moment. Yes, he enjoyed dining from a king's larder. With a beautiful ex-templar woman by his side, at that. Things didn't get much better than this.

He was wrong. True to his word, after the meal Jedra circulated among the elves, removing himself and Kayan from the woman who had propositioned him, and presently they heard another source of laughter and good spirits among the tents the elves had pitched a hundred feet or so from the burning caravan. When they went to investigate they found an incredible sight: the elves were taking baths. The caravan had reached an outpost only a day before it was attacked, so its storage tanks had been full, and since there was more water than the elves could carry with them they were using two barrels of it for the greatest of luxuries.

This group had a bit more modesty than the warriors. They had set the water barrels inside two tents, one for men and one for women. Jedra and Kayan braved the elves' good-natured jibes and joined the lines, and when their turns came they were each given a full minute to climb into their barrels and soak off the grime of captivity.

A water vendor had once let Jedra reach an arm all the way to the bottom of a full cask to retrieve a ceramic coin; until now that had been his only experience with immersion. When he untied his breechcloth and climbed into the barrel, the sensation of cool wetness sliding up his legs and chest was at once the most alarming and most sensuous thing he had ever felt. He took a few seconds to savor the experience, then quickly scrubbed himself with one of the cloths draped over the barrel's side, ducked his head under and swished his hair around, and climbed back out again.

He dripped dry while the next person bathed, all the while marveling at how strange and wonderful his life had become.

* * *

Kayan smelled of flower blossoms. The women had added perfume to their bathwater, and now every time Jedra drew close to her he noticed it. He worked up his courage and took her hand while they explored the rest of the elf camp.

Beyond the tents they found post-and-rope pens holding fifteen or twenty kanks, the long, beetlelike creatures the elves used for pack animals. Kanks also produced honey in melon-sized globules on their abdomens; when one of them brushed by the edge of the pen Jedra reached out and grabbed a small nectar sack.

“Here, try some,” he said, squeezing some of the sticky green honey out onto Kayan’s palm. She looked at it dubiously, but when Jedra began licking the sweet fluid from his own fingers and saying “Mmm,” in obvious ecstasy, she gave it a cautious lick.

“Oh!” she said in surprise. “This is good.”

“Of course it is,” Jedra said. “I wouldn’t give you anything that wasn’t.”

“Of course not.” She smiled and took his hand again, and they walked slowly back into camp, eagerly finishing off the rest of the honey like a couple of children.

As darkness fell and the flames died down the air began to grow colder. The elves all wore brightly colored cloaks that they wrapped around themselves when they began to feel the chill, but Jedra had only his slave-issue breechcloth and Kayan her breechcloth and halter so they found themselves drifting back closer to the fire as the night wore on.

That turned out to be a bad idea. Under the flickering firelight, Kayan’s freshly cleaned and untanned temple-dweller’s skin shone like a white beacon, and as the only uncovered woman there, her ample bosom drew every male’s attention. Jedra put his arm around her for warmth, but also to let everyone know they were a couple. Even so, it seemed as if every pair of eyes were focused on them.

I think maybe we should try to find a place to settle down for the night, Jedra mindsent to her.

Someplace warm, Kayan sent back. She shivered within the circle of his arm.

I'll ask Galar where we can sleep. Jedra scanned the semicircle of faces for their friend, but he was nowhere to be seen. He cast his consciousness outward psionically, and eventually found the elf off in the direction of the tents set up near the slip face of a dune a few dozen paces from the caravan. He couldn't sense which tent the elf was in or what he was doing, but that didn't matter. *Galar?* he sent. *Sorry to trouble you, but Kayan and I are cold and tired. Is there somewhere we can sleep?*

He didn't expect a reply; his sending talent didn't include mind reading as well. He knew Galar had heard him, though, so he settled in to wait.

But the burly elf warrior, Sahalik, found them first. Jedra heard footsteps behind them, then a deep, hearty voice said, "Huddling close to the fire won't keep you warm for long. Fires burn out—even one as big as this."

Jedra turned to see Sahalik standing with his hands on his hips. He, too, had draped a cloak over his shoulders, but he wore it pulled back to expose his hairy chest. The hilt of his sword stood forward at an angle that insured instant readiness, and the pommel glittered in the firelight.

"We're discovering that," Jedra said. "We've asked Galar for a place to —"

"Galar! Hah, you won't see him for the rest of the night. He's got some catching up to do, if you follow my meaning."

"Oh," Jedra said, suddenly embarrassed. Of course Galar had better things to do than look after Jedra and Kayan. He was a full member of the tribe; he probably had a lover or even a wife here, maybe even a whole family. He had been away longer than just the few days in the slave caravan, too; during their long hours of captivity he had described how he'd been forced into the gladiator games in Urik for at least a month, fighting for his life against wild animals and other gladiators, some willing, some not. If Jedra were in Galar's place, he probably wouldn't surface again for days.

“Well, then,” Jedra said, “maybe we can ask the same thing of you that we asked of Galar.”

Sahalik laughed. “Seems to me you turned down the best offer in the camp earlier tonight. You should’ve thought of that before it got cold; Rayna’s already found another.” He shifted his eyes to Kayan and grinned widely. Two of his teeth were missing, one upper and one lower on the right side. “As for you, pretty one, I might be able to find a warm spot for you tonight.”

“I imagine you could,” Kayan said sarcastically, “but I prefer to stay with Jedra.”

The elf frowned. “Don’t be so hasty. I’ve got a fine tent all to my own, and a soft—”

“I said *no*.” Kayan’s voice cut through the night like a thunderclap. All conversation stopped. In the sudden silence, a burning timber popped, sending a shower of sparks into the air.

Sahalik stood like a statue, completely taken aback. Evidently no one had ever refused him before, at least so publicly. He opened his mouth to speak, but could find no words to say.

Galar saved them all from further embarrassment. He skidded into the circle of firelight, his clothes in disarray and his hair sticking out in all directions, and took in the scene in a glance. Then he whirled around and shouted into the darkness, “Where’s that lazy bard? The night’s nearly gone. We’ll hear your song now, bard!”

The rest of the tribe picked up his cue. They cheered and stamped their feet, shouting, “Song! Song!” and eventually the bard stepped into the firelight. He carried a harp under his right arm, and a sheaf of parchment in his left hand. He looked less worried than when Jedra had first seen him; in fact, now that he was the center of attention he walked with a cocky spring to his step and when he spoke his voice was full of mischief.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said, waving the parchment. “I’m up to seventy-three verses now and still have more tale to tell.”

The elves groaned, and someone yelled, “Save it for the trail tomorrow. Give us the short version.”

The bard shook his head. “Nay, nay, that would slight our guests, and our illustrious Galar whose misadventures in Urik brought us to this glorious feast. I shall give you the long version, and make up more as I go along.”

There was quite a bit of good-natured groaning, and someone whispered loudly, “Be ready with the rotten fruit.”

The bard pointed at a water cask that someone was using for a stool and said, “I appropriate your seat for the cause.” When the elf had vacated it, he set his right foot firmly on the cask, placed his harp on his thigh, and gave the strings a strum. The air filled with resonant sound, and the babble of voices hushed. The bard picked out the beginnings of a tune, then when he had built it into a recognizable melody, he began to sing in a rich, carrying voice:

*Oh, the Jura-Dai tribe is a wandering one
And our exploits are marry and true,
But the exploit I sing of tonight is so dumb
'Tis a deed only Galar would do.*

The elves burst into laughter, and Galar took a deep bow. All through the exchange Jedra had been painfully aware of Sahalik’s rigid presence at his back, but now he felt motion behind him. He couldn’t hear footsteps in the din, but his psionic sense told him the elf warrior was leaving. Jedra let out a deep breath he hadn’t even been aware he was holding.

The bard waited for the laughter to die down, then sang:

*The big city drew him with promise of fame
And of fortune beyond an elf’s dreams,
So he set out with high hopes and soon enough came To the city of
Urik, it seems.*

*But what he found there wasn't quite what he'd planned
When he left all the comforts of home.
No, instead of the riches he'd heard he would find,
He wound up on the streets, all alone.
Now that in itself wouldn't be such a fright
For an elf as resourceful as him,
Save for one crucial error he made that first night,
When he misplaced his brain at an inn.*

The bard had to wait nearly a minute for the laughter to die down before he could continue, but each verse drew more merriment as he detailed Galar's descent—through swindles and gambling losses—from cocky freeman to a lone elfin heavy debt, fighting as a gladiator for money. At last, hounded by creditors and fearing for his life, Galar had used the last of his money in a desperate scheme to sneak out of the city undetected: he had bought his way onto a slave caravan leaving for Tyr. No one would think to look for him in the slave hold, and once they were free of the city, the wagon master would release him.

Of course the wagon master had taken his money and left him in the slave hold, where he met Kayan, who had been taken there when a powerful lover had become jealous of her attention to Urik's king Hamanu.

That's not true! Kayan mindsent to Jedra. I was enslaved because I refused to use my psionic healing power to kill a man.

I know that, Jedra replied, but the bard doesn't so he had to make something up. This makes a better tale anyway.

So you say, Kayan sent. She scowled as the song continued to portray her as a reckless wanton who had slept her way to the bottom of society.

A few stanzas later Jedra found himself agreeing with Kayan when the bard began detailing how *he* wound up enslaved. The bard portrayed him as a thief and a brawler who had finally met his match, rather than as a curious young man who had accidentally stumbled upon a magical talisman that a real mage had sold him into slavery to obtain. Jedra wasn't sure he wanted

the truth to be known, but he didn't want everyone to think he was a thief, either.

All the same, he smiled bravely through the verses about him, wanting least of all to offend his hosts.

He tried to listen psionically to find what the elves really thought of him, but he just didn't have that power. He could send, but not eavesdrop. He could sense when someone was watching him, though, and although everyone was doing so now, he detected one source of interest much stronger than the rest. He looked across the fire toward the source of the sensation, expecting to see Rayna, the woman who had propositioned him earlier, but instead he found Sahalik staring back at him, his face as cold as the night.

Oh, wonderful. Of all the people to be on the bad side of, Sahalik was the absolute worst. Jedra looked away, careful not to make eye contact again throughout the rest of the song.

Fortunately, the bard had exaggerated the number of stanzas as well. He was only up to forty or so when he finished with a rousing description of Galar's rescue and the heroics of the Jura-Dai warriors. Sahalik figured prominently in the end of the tale, and Jedra was relieved to see a crowd of well-wishers gather around him afterward.

Galar took Jedra and Kayan aside after the song and led them toward the tents. "My apologies for not thinking of it earlier," he said, "but now I will find you some spare clothing and a place to sleep."

"Thank you," Kayan said, her words nearly lost in a wide yawn.

Jedra was afraid that he and Kayan would be imposing on Galar all night, but the elf led them to an enormous tent wherein dozens of elves had already rolled out sleeping mats and were snoring softly. Candles glowed in protected alcoves at either end of the tent, providing just enough light to see by but not enough to keep anyone awake. In their soft light, Jedra could see that the tents, unlike the clothing the elves wore, were grayish tan, the color of sand, so they would blend in with the desert.

More sleeping mats waited in a pile near the doorway, each tucked into a knapsack with a name or a design woven into the closing flap at the top. Galar searched through the stack, pulling two knapsacks from it and handing them to his friends. They were made of heavy, durable cloth, and the mats rolled up inside them were even thicker. Both showed signs of wear along the exposed edges.

“Won’t their owners miss them?” Jedra asked as Galar sorted through a basket of clothing beside the pile of bedrolls.

“Not any longer,” Galar said. “These belonged to people killed in the battle. They are the property of the entire tribe now.”

“Oh.” Jedra looked at his knapsack again. He couldn’t read the elven script, but it wouldn’t have mattered if he could. He didn’t know any of the people who had died today. So why did he suddenly feel reluctant to sleep on this mat?

Galar noticed his concern and said, “Do not trouble yourself. Everything has its cost, and the Jura-Dai knew that before they attacked the caravan. We all live and die for the good of the tribe; without raids such as these we would soon starve to death in the desert.” He pulled a long yellow robe out of the basket and held it up to Kayan. Made for an elf, it was about three feet too long for her. “You will have to tuck a fold under the belt to avoid tripping,” Galar said, “but there is plenty of cloth here to keep you warm at night, and the light color and the looseness of it will help keep you cool by day.”

“That will be nice.” Kayan took it from him and draped it over her shoulders. Galar pulled a light blue robe from the basket for Jedra, then waved an arm toward an unoccupied stretch of floor near one wall of the tent. “Sleep well,” he said, “but not too well. We break camp at dawn.” With that, he turned and left them to their rest.

They stepped gingerly over sleeping elves to the bare spot and unrolled their mats. Jedra lay back on his with an audible creaking of joints. *Ok, this feels good*, he mind-sent to Kayan.

She had turned her back to him and was fussing with something under her robe. A sudden warmth spread over Jedra when he realized she was

removing her halter and breechcloth.

And she knew just what he was thinking. *Don't you go getting ideas, she sent to him. This cursed leather itches, that's all. I'll sleep better without it.*

Of course, Jedra sent. He refrained from adding, *Never mind that I'll not sleep at all now...*

Fatigue soon proved him wrong. He closed his eyes to give her more privacy, and when he opened them again the tent wall beside him was aglow with the first light of day.

* * *

The elves broke camp within minutes of rising. Nobody stopped for breakfast; they just rolled up their mats, collected their other personal belongings and stuffed them into their knapsacks, then packed up the tents and other equipment, tied it all onto the kanks, and set off into the desert at a brisk walking pace. They didn't follow the road, but headed straight over the dunes to the west. They spread out in a long string, the scouts and faster walkers in the lead, and the rest trailing back for nearly a quarter mile. Warriors armed with swords and longbows scattered themselves along the line to provide protection for everyone in case of an attack. Nobody rode the kanks—elves considered that dishonorable—but after the first few miles the adults began to trade off in carrying the younger children. Even so, Jedra found himself pushing to keep up, and Kayan with her shorter legs was sweating and straining even harder than he was.

Neither of them complained. Traveling with the elves, even at their breakneck pace, was infinitely preferable to fending for themselves in the desert. They had already encountered the remains of two of the caravan's drivers who had set off along this same route last night; their skeletons rested halfway up the face of a dune less than a mile from the road, their bones already picked clean and cracking in the dry heat of the sun.

Jedra tucked his thumbs under his knapsack's shoulder straps to help support the weight. There wasn't much in it: just his sleeping mat and what few personal belongings he had taken from Dornal, the mage who had sold him into slavery. He and Kayan had killed Dornal in the psionic battle that had erupted when the elves attacked the caravan. Jedra also carried the magical talisman that had gotten him into trouble in the first place: a piece of glass that had been created when a templar's magical lightning bolt struck the sand. The glass magnified things. Images, the heat of the sun, possibly even psionic power. As Jedra trudged along with it in his pack, he began to wonder if it was somehow magnifying its own weight as well.

He tried to ignore his discomfort by remembering the sensation of power he had felt when he and Kayan linked minds. She had taught him how to do it when she realized he needed her experience to control his wild talent, but neither of them had expected the incredible enhancement that came with their communion. Alone, he could send mental messages and sense when he was being watched and even push things around with his mind when he was sufficiently motivated, and she could heal wounds and cure illness, but together they commanded psionic power beyond the scope of most masters. They had used it to search far across the desert for the Jura-Dai even though their bodies were trapped in the slave caravan in the midst of a sandstorm, and they had used it again to help win the battle when the elves had finally arrived to free their tribesman.

That had been at once the most wonderful and the most horrible moment of Jedra's life. Battling on a psychic plane, where mental images were more important than reality, Jedra and Kayan had envisioned themselves as a swift, sleek-winged hawk flying and swooping among the nearly insubstantial shadows of the elves and slavers fighting below. They weren't alone in the vision, however. The slave master's psionic manifestation had been a great whirlwind that sucked up everything in its path, and the elves' psionist had been an eagle with sharp, ripping talons and beak. The mage, Dornal, had been there as well, a dark, constantly evolving bat that spit lightning bolts ahead of it as it swept through the vision. The bat had killed the eagle and dissipated the whirlwind almost without effort, but Jedra and Kayan had flown above it and used their

combined power to trap the bat beneath a sheet of glass. Then, almost as an afterthought, they had bent the barrier into the same shape as Jedra's lightning glass, and the bat had burst into flame.

The thrill of that victory was like nothing either of them had experienced before. They felt smarter and more powerful than anything else in the world. They broke their contact reluctantly, and then only because they knew from previous experience that they were using up their bodies' strength at a phenomenal rate.

Coming back to the normal plane of existence had felt like losing half their intelligence, but that had not been the worst shock. When they had gathered enough strength to visit the mage's quarters they had seen the real-world effect of their psionic battle: The elves' psionist was dead, and Dornal had been burned beyond recognition, his body little more than a greasy skeleton on the deck. The wooden floorboards had barely been scorched, but later they had found three more people burned to death in the cabin below. They might well have been slavers, or they might have been innocent passengers—there was no way to tell. In either case, it was obvious that Jedra and Kayan had killed them, and that the power they had thought under control was in fact wild and dangerous.

They had vowed then to find a true psionics master, one who had studied the mental arts for years and who could teach them how to control their rogue talent. They had also vowed not to use it again until they knew what they were doing, but Jedra's mind burned with the desire to link with Kayan's again. Not the simple contact that allowed them to communicate, but the complete, mind-expanding intermingling of thoughts and abilities that would allow them to become one single being again, enormously powerful, enormously intelligent...

Enormously dangerous.

He wrenched himself away from that line of thought. An obsession of such intensity was in itself fraught with risk. He could easily come to depend on their mental convergence, becoming like the dream addicts in the city's warrens who used magical spells or the essences of various plants to

keep their minds on an alternate plane while their bodies slowly wasted away.

Jedra brought his thoughts back to the present. There was plenty to occupy his mind here: the sights and sounds and smells of the desert were rich and varied. He had always envisioned the desert as an endless stretch of sand and nothing else—and near the road where generations of travelers had eaten or burned whatever had once lived, it was—but out in the deep wilderness there was a surprising amount of vegetation. To be sure, all of it was armored better than most gladiators against the harsh climate and the myriad hungry animals who would eat anything that couldn't defend itself, but there was a weird beauty to the spikes and darts and scales that adorned the plants. Some of them were taller than even the elves, with multiple arms reaching out for dozens of feet around them. Jedra noticed that the elves never walked under one of those, and he realized why when he saw one of the arms swish downward toward a kank that had drifted too close. The arm thudded into the kank's pack and stuck there, the pack impaled on the arm's many spines, and it only released its grip when the kank leaped away and its weight threatened to rip the arm from the tree.

Everything is dangerous out here, Kayan mindsent, even though she and Jedra were walking side-by-side. Psionic speech was easier than talking with a dry mouth.

Things are dangerous everywhere, Jedra answered. *Remember what it was like in Urik, with people ready to rob you the first time you lowered your guard? We just need to learn a new set of rules here, that's all.*

I suppose so. I just feel so vulnerable out here. So exposed.

Jedra chuckled. Kayan was all but indistinguishable, draped from head to foot in the billowy yellow robe that Galar had given her. The elves had warned her not to expose so much as the tip of her nose to the sun, for with her fair skin it would blister and peel within hours. Jedra risked no more than she did, for he'd been a city dweller, too, and he knew that even his elven ancestry wouldn't protect him until he'd built up some resistance to the fierce and unforgiving sun.

You think it's funny? she asked.

A little, Jedra admitted. Not just our clothing, either. Here we are, the dread psionic warriors who took on a caravan master and a mage all by ourselves, two untamed talents whose biggest problem is that when we join our minds together we're too powerful to control, and yet we're nearly helpless in the desert.

That's not funny, that's pathetic, Kayan said. She trudged along dispiritedly for a few minutes, then added, *All right, I can see the irony in it, but I still don't like feeling ignorant.*

At times like this, Jedra was glad for the mindlink. He'd never had any kind of formal education; words like "pathetic" and "irony" would have gone right over his head in a regular conversation, but under the mindlink he received the meaning of the words as well as the words themselves. He took a minute to think about the new concepts and fix them in his mind.

Up ahead, a young elf boy was proudly playing with a wooden sword his father had given him. Jedra watched him approach a short, wide-trunked cactus and slice off its thorns with a series of smooth strokes along the surface, then stab the cactus near the top and run once around it to cut the cap free. Then the boy reached inside and drew out a handful of white pulp. He held it overhead in his fist with his thumb pointing downward, and when he squeezed, a stream of water ran down the thumb into his mouth.

There, Jedra said. *You see? Yes, everything here is dangerous, but everything is—he used another word he'd learned from Kayan—everything is vulnerable, too. We just have to learn how to take advantage of the desert's weaknesses.*

Before it takes advantage of ours, Kayan said dubiously.

The boy ran happily onward to catch up with his father. Evidently the remains of the cactus were open to anyone; one of the women in front of Jedra stopped beside it and reached in for her own handful of watery pulp, then walked on, sucking at it as she went. Jedra was thirsty, too; he followed her lead and reached into the cavity in the center of the cactus, scooped out a handful of the cool white, fibery pulp, and handed it to Kayan, then dug out another for himself. It smelled fresh and faintly spicy, and when he held it overhead and squeezed it a stream of sweet nectar ran

down his thumb onto his tongue. It tasted wonderful: a sugary wetness that refreshed him instantly and seemed to pour energy into every muscle in his body.

We'll learn, Jedra sent. The elves will teach us how to survive in the desert, and then we can begin our search for a psionics master to teach us how to control our wild talent.

"Mmm," Kayan said, but she said it aloud so Jedra had no idea how she meant it.

* * *

The elves traveled steadily through the morning hours, but when the sun drew high overhead and the heat began to grow oppressive, they stopped, repitched their tents, and ate another meal before sleeping through the hottest part of the day. Jedra was grateful for the rest; his legs were aching already from the strain of walking so many miles in loose sand, and before they stopped he had been feeling faint from lack of food.

"Hah, today you've had it easy," Galar told him as they sat on the sand under a canopy and devoured leftover inix and some kind of crumbly brown honeycake full of nuts and dried fruit. "Normally we begin before dawn, but we got a late start this morning because of the festivities last night."

Kayan washed down a mouthful of cake with a generous swig of water, then said, "Well, I'm glad we got a gradual introduction to things. I think this is about as far as I could go today."

Galar grinned. "I hope you don't mean that. We will move out again at dusk for another few hours of travel."

She had been about to take another bite of inix; she stopped with the meat halfway to her mouth and said, "You're kidding. What's the rush?"

"There is no rush," Galar said. "That is just the way elves travel. Two short marches during the most pleasant parts of the day. Be glad we *aren't* in a hurry, or we would move at a run, sometimes all through the night."

Jedra had a thought. “What about the chief?” he asked. “He’s got a limp. He can’t run, can he?”

Galar lost a little of his smile. “He can and must if he wishes to remain chief. We have no room in the tribe for people who can’t keep up, no matter who they are.”

“Wonderful,” Kayan said. She finished the rest of her meal in silence and disappeared immediately into the community tent, evidently determined to get as much rest as possible before the tribe moved out again.

Jedra followed her a few minutes later, the meal after such heavy exertion making him drowsy, but as he stepped into the relative darkness of the huge tent he was momentarily blind, and he crashed right into someone coming out.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, backing up and blinking to see who he’d collided with. To his horror, he saw Sahalik standing there, frowning down at him as if Jedra were something smelly and unpleasant he’d just stepped in.

“Sorry,” Jedra said again. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

Sahalik didn’t say a word. He just stepped out of the tent, brushing Jedra aside effortlessly and continuing on his way. The hair on the back of Jedra’s neck tingled as he watched the elf walk away, his head held high.

When Sahalik had disappeared around the flank of the next tent, Jedra turned back inside, found his bedroll in the now-small pile, and stepped across the sleepers to spread it out beside Kayan.

Did he give you a hard time again? he sent, but her only answer was a soft snore.

* * *

The evening march was excruciating. Muscles overtaxed in the morning walk had had just enough time to stiffen up before being called upon to perform once again, and the meal they had eaten hardly seemed to sustain Jedra or Kayan for more than the first couple of miles. Their sandals

weren't made for long hikes, either; the straps dug into their feet and the sand wore the skin raw.

Wincing with every step, they slowly drifted back toward the end of the line of elves, finally settling in with the half-dozen elderly women who walked with silent determination through the cooling sand. Jedra didn't know for sure, but he suspected if any of them faltered, they would simply be left behind. That would explain their perseverance.

There were no elderly men. The tribe's chief was the oldest male Jedra had seen, and he was barely half the age of some of the women. He was still in excellent shape, too; even with his limp, it was he who set this breakneck pace. Jedra supposed most elven men died in battle or in hunting accidents long before they reached old age. Not an encouraging thought.

But then he wouldn't be traveling with the Jura-Dai for long. As soon as they reached a city where he and Kayan could arrange for more conventional transportation they could continue their search for a psionics master in relative safety and comfort. Jedra had the money he'd taken from Dornal, the dead mage. There was enough silver and gold in the leather pouch to provide for two travelers for at least a year if they were frugal, and Jedra was an expert at that. He also had the mage's charm bag full of spellcasting amulets and fetishes, which was of no use to a psionist but might be worth quite a bit to another sorcerer. Yes, Jedra thought, if he and Kayan survived the next few days they should be all right.

When the stars came out and the elves kept on marching, neither Jedra nor Kayan was at all sure what would come to pass, but finally, just as they were about to collapse right on the trail, the tribe came to a halt and began pitching tents.

Numbly, like the shambling undead that sometimes plagued the cities after a magical battle, they helped erect the community tent, then lined up with the rest of the tribe for a welcome dinner of honeycakes and erdlu eggs. Jedra ate his egg raw, as was the elven custom, slicing open the leathery shell and sucking out the interior in hungry gulps. Its spicy tartness revived him a little, so he went over to the campfire after he finished eating rather than going straight to bed. It was cold enough now that a few minutes

in front of a fire before turning in would feel just right. Kayan joined him, and they sat in the sand beside two young girls, who immediately began asking questions about their lives in the city.

Suddenly Jedra wished he had opted for bed instead. The elf girls were young and curious and hardly tired at all; their steady barrage of questions and the foreigners' answers drew more and more attention until everyone around the fire was listening to their tales of life in the city of Urik.

Kayan's description of her days as psionic healer among the templars drew a mixture of hostility and wonder. None of the elves—save maybe Galar—had ever come close to a sorcerer-king's palace, much less lived right next to one. It was clear that most of the elves didn't believe half of her descriptions of the riches she had enjoyed, especially the lush gardens the king kept hidden behind his palace walls.

Jedra's life on the streets was easier for them to understand, and in many ways more exciting. He recounted a few of his more audacious exploits in the market, and as he began warming to the subject he embellished things a bit, claiming for himself a few incidents that he had only witnessed or heard about. He was just getting to the good part of a complete fabrication about how he'd saved a noblewoman from a crazed gladiator when a sudden blow to his back sent him sprawling in the sand beside the fire.

His street instincts belatedly kicked into action. His loose robe nearly tangled him up, but he pulled it tight in front of him and rolled sideways to avoid a kick or a weapon blow, then leaped to his feet, ready to run or fight, whichever was required. It was the exact wrong thing to do; when his vision cleared he saw Sahalik standing before him, his arms crossed over his burly chest.

"Oops," Sahalik said in his deep voice. "I didn't see you there, hero." Then he sat down next to Kayan.

A few of the other elves laughed, and someone called out, "Ooh, don't let him get away with that!"

"Yeah," someone else said, "show him what you did to the gladiator!"

Jedra looked nervously at the sea of narrow faces turned toward him in the flickering firelight. They were all waiting to see what he would do, and he knew only one thing would satisfy them. He wasn't about to get himself killed just to please a tribe of elves, but even if he hadn't had an audience, he knew from experience that he had to stand up to Sahalik somehow or suffer his abuse indefinitely.

Trouble was, there was no way he could fight the elf warrior. Sahalik could tie him in a knot any time he wanted to, and they both knew it. Jedra's only chance was to humiliate him somehow and make him afraid to tangle with the half-elf again. He thought frantically for anything in his experience that might work here, and suddenly he had it. He had seen a pair of jesters stage a mock fight one time...

Straightening his robe again, he stepped back a pace to give himself some room, then swept his right foot across the ground from side to side, drawing a deep line in the sand with the toe of his sandal.

"I dare you to cross that line," he said.

The elves fell silent. They obviously hadn't expected Jedra to challenge the strongest member of the tribe.

Nor did Kayan. *What are you thing?* she mindsent. She started to get up, but Jedra stopped her.

Stay there! I'm trying to keep from getting killed.

I don't see how this is going to accomplish that, she said, but she settled back down.

Watch. Jedra beckoned to Sahalik with his fingers. "Come on, cross the line."

Sahalik grinned widely and came to his feet with a smooth unfolding of his legs. Balling his hands into fists, he took a step forward, then another—directly across Jedra's line in the sand.

But Jedra was no longer there waiting for him. The moment Sahalik had committed his weight to his second step, Jedra darted around him and dived for the vacant spot at Kayan's side.

“Thanks for keeping my seat warm,” he said as nonchalantly as he could manage, twisting around to sit there as if nothing had ever happened.

The elves burst into laughter—all but Sahalik. The elf warrior whirled around to face Jedra, his eyebrows nearly meeting over his nose with the intensity of his scowl. He clenched and unclenched his fists, his face glowing even redder than the firelight could account for, then he shouted at the tribe, “Silence!”

He was their champion warrior, and next in line to be chief. They gave him silence. Sahalik turned back to Jedra and said, “You choose the coward’s way out. Amusing, perhaps, but foolish tricks will not serve you in the desert. I challenge you to prove your worth to the tribe.”

“He’s already done that,” Galar said, stepping up next to Sahalik. “Have you already forgotten how he helped you locate the slave caravan? And how he fought the psionist and the magician there when we most needed him? His strength is mental, not physical.”

Sahalik spat into the fire. “Mental tricks are useless if he runs from battle. He must prove that he will fight, hand-to-hand in single combat, or he must leave us now.”

“He’s our guest, Sahalik,” Galar said.

“He is a *parasite*,” Sahalik answered.

Galar hesitated, obviously not wanting to put himself in Jedra’s place, but he couldn’t abandon his friend, either. Softly, he said, “This isn’t about Jedra and you know it. You’re just mad because Kayan prefers him to you.”

Sahalik nodded. “Perhaps. Then I challenge him to fight for her as well as for his own honor.”

Kayan had kept quiet so far, but at that she got up and stood in front of Sahalik, her hands on her hips, and said, “I’m not anybody’s property to fight over. I choose whom I want to associate with, and you’re not my type.”

Sahalik barely glanced at her. “Beware, human woman, or you may find yourself alone in the desert with only your chosen worm for company.”

A few of the other elves laughed at the affront, and Jedra realized he was losing them. They'd been perfectly happy to laugh at his amusing stories, and even at his practical joke, but he was an outsider and a half-elf. They weren't going to back him against one of their own. He would have to defuse the situation some other way.

He rose to his feet and said, "All right, both of you, that's enough. Insults and taunts are for children. We're supposed to be adults here; why don't we start acting like it?"

He meant it as a rebuke of the whole argument, but Sahalik said, "Yes, why don't we? Among the Jura-Dai, adults respond to a challenge."

The elves backed him up with shouts of, "Yeah, come on!" and "Fight, fight!"

"Fighting just for the sake of a fight is for children, too," Jedra said loudly. "There are better ways to resolve our differences."

"Like what, flip a coin?" someone called out.

"No," Jedra said over the rising laughter. "We can choose a judge who will listen to both sides of the argument and decide who is right."

"You'd rather talk than fight," Sahalik said contemptuously.

Jedra turned to face him, but he spoke to everyone. "Of course I'd rather talk than fight. With talk you can actually solve the problem, but in a fight you can only beat your opponent into submission. Nothing is resolved but the question of who has the bigger muscles."

Sahalik sneered. "And the question of who has the courage to enter battle—and who does not."

Again, someone shouted "Fight!" Another voice echoed the first, then another. Once it got started there was no stopping it. Chanting "Fight, fight, fight!" continuously now, the elves backed away to clear a space around Sahalik and Jedra. Kayan and Galar stood their ground, but there was nothing they could do and everyone knew it.

Jedra felt sick to his stomach, as if he had already been punched there. He was going to have to fight this slab of muscle and sinew after all. Either that or fend for himself in the desert, and he knew how poor his chances

would be there. He looked around at the jeering faces for some sign that this might be a cruel joke, that he might be offered a last-minute reprieve, but all around him he saw only hostility and eagerness for a conflict.

Then the crowd suddenly quieted. All the faces turned away from the fire, toward the tents, where a lone figure limped toward them: the chief.

Jedra sighed in relief. Surely the leader of the tribe wouldn't allow a guest to be suckered into a fight merely to satisfy one belligerent warrior. He would set things straight, and maybe even order Sahalik to leave Kayan alone from now on.

The crowd parted for the chief, then closed again behind him. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

Galar explained the situation. He left out Kayan's role in the dispute, which made Sahalik's actions seem less petty, but Jedra didn't think it wise to correct him. Sahalik looked bad enough as it was. The chief frowned throughout Galar's explanation, then he turned to Sahalik and said, "It is obvious that you have let anger cloud your duty toward hospitality. Do you persist in challenging our guest to combat?"

Sahalik stood his ground. "I do. If the *half-elf* is going to travel with us, I must know if he can be counted on in battle."

"That's not the issue here, and you know it," Galar said, but the chief shushed him.

"I have eyes," he told him. "And ears. Rumor spreads like the wind through this camp. But we have rules, and though Sahalik's motives are suspect, he is within his right to demand a test." Jedra's heart fell again as the chief turned to him and said, "Jedra, your courage has been called into question. You must accept Sahalik's challenge or leave the tribe."

CHAPTER TWO

“You’re kidding.” Jedra stared at the chief as if he’d just said it was going to rain. “Anybody here can call anybody else a coward, and that person has to fight him? That’s a tribal rule?”

The chief nodded. “It is the way of the desert.”

“Well it’s a pretty barbaric way as far as I’m concerned,” Jedra said. He sighed heavily. “But we’re your guests, so I guess we’ll play by your rules.” He untied his robe and handed it to Kayan, leaving himself free to move in only his breechcloth and sandals.

The elves cheered and whistled, excited that there would be a fight after all. Jedra heard rapid discussion in elvish, and saw money changing hands. Was someone actually betting on him? Or were they just betting on how long the fight would last? He didn’t want to know.

You don’t have to do this, Kayan mindsent through the din. Not for me. We can take our chances in the desert.

Jedra flexed his arms and legs to loosen them up. Adrenalin made him feel alert, but he knew it was a false high. His body was exhausted from hours of steady marching, and it wouldn’t put out much more effort without a night’s rest.

Even so, he said to Kayan, *No, we don’t know enough yet. We’d be dead by morning. At least this way one of us will survive. And who knows, maybe both of us will. If they do this all the time, it can’t very mil be a fight to the death or there’d be nobody left in the tribe.*

Kayan was realist enough not to protest any further. She said, *At least let me share the last of my strength with you.*

She could do that, Jedra knew. She had done it in the caravan when the slave master had punished him for attempting to escape. But even together they didn’t have the strength to defeat Sahalik. Not physically, at any rate. And if they tried to fight the elf psionically, their unpredictable power could just as easily kill him as subdue him. Jedra might not have minded that on

general principles, but he didn't think it would sit well with the tribe. *No*, he told her. *Save it for after the fight. I'll need it more then anyway.*

She looked into his eyes, an odd, almost proud smile on her face. Could she actually be excited by all this? *I'll stay linked with you in case you need me*, she sent.

No, Jedra said again. *I'll do better without the distraction.* He pulled his hair back and tied it in a knot so it would stay out of his eyes, then said aloud, "All right, let's get this over with."

He crouched down and held his arms out in what he hoped was a fighter's stance. He had never entered a contest like this before; all his previous physical conflicts had been sudden things, ambushes in the dark or other people's brawls that got out of hand. They had all been over just as quickly, for Jedra usually didn't stick around any longer than he had to. Too many street fighters ended up dead for there to be any future in it.

The chief backed away from Jedra and Sahalik, pulling Galar and Kayan back with him into the circle of elves. Sahalik grinned at Jedra; the place where his two teeth were missing looked like a gap in a fence. No, more like a hole in a block wall. The elf was easily twice Jedra's weight. "I will feed your bones to the kanks," he said in his deep voice.

That sounded like a formal insult. Jedra certainly hoped it was, anyway. He wondered what the formal reply was, but since he didn't know it, he merely said, "They'll be too busy feeding on your bloated carcass to care." Before Sahalik could react, he leaped forward and swung his right fist into the elf's stomach, putting all his weight behind it, then dodged to the left and dived to the sand. Sahalik roared with surprise and spun around to face Jedra again, but Jedra had already tangled his legs between his opponent's. Sahalik teetered for a second, waving his arms madly for balance, but he finally toppled to the side.

That gave Jedra the perfect opportunity to grab one of the elf's arms and wrench it around behind his back, but when he tried to push himself up to do it a sharp pain lanced up through his arm and he fell back to the ground. He didn't know how to hit someone properly: he had broken his hand.

Sahalik didn't waste any time; he was back on his feet in an instant, apparently none the worse for Jedra's punch. Jedra used his uninjured arm to push himself away just as Sahalik aimed a kick at his head, then he got to his feet and circled warily to the side, watching his opponent's eyes and trying to anticipate what he would do next.

The crowd was shouting and jeering, but at whom Jedra had no idea. He flexed his hand, and pain shot through it. Yes, it was almost certainly broken. But he couldn't let Sahalik know that. He held the hand out in front of him as if about to lead another attack with it, then backed away and began to circle around.

Sahalik was waiting for just such a move. The moment Jedra's weight shifted, he kicked out with one of his long legs and caught Jedra in the ribs, knocking him backward onto the sand next to the fire. Jedra gasped for breath, but none came. He didn't have time for another attempt; Sahalik was upon him in an instant, aiming a roundhouse blow to the side of his head.

Jedra jerked back, instinctively kicking out as Sahalik leaned forward, and his sandal-clad foot caught the elf square in the face. His psionic force-projecting ability added to the blow, but not enough. Sahalik rocked back but he didn't go down, and he came forward again with murder in his eyes.

But Jedra wasn't there. He had scrambled back until he could get to his feet, then leaped straight over the fire, putting it between himself and Sahalik. Finally, he managed to draw a ragged breath.

"Coward!" Sahalik shouted, jumping over the fire after him, but Jedra had expected just that. While the elf was still in the air, he reached out with his good hand and swept Sahalik's feet upward behind him. Sahalik came down on his hands, and this time Jedra leaped on his back, coming down hard with both knees over the elf's kidneys and reaching with his good hand for Sahalik's left arm. He got the warrior's bulging forearm in his grip and managed to pull it out from under him, but instead of collapsing face first into the ground, the enormous elf rolled backward as he fell, pinning his own arm under himself but also knocking Jedra off balance.

Then Sahalik rolled over again—and wound up straddling Jedra, his knees on Jedra's arms. Jedra tried to kick at the elf's head, but the best he

could manage was a knee in the back. Sahalik merely leaned forward, and then Jedra couldn't do even that. He tried to punch Sahalik psionically, but without Kayan's help his power was so weak the elf hardly budged.

"You fought better than I expected," Sahalik said. "But you still lost. And there is no prize for second place in battle."

Jedra could barely hear him over the shouting elves, but his meaning was clear enough even so, especially when he leaned still closer and gripped Jedra's neck in his massive right hand.

"Let us see how long you can hold your breath," the elf said, and he began to squeeze.

Jedra felt his throat constricting, first his windpipe and then even the blood supply to his head being squeezed shut. Bright red streamers began to swirl in his vision. He had only a few seconds left before he would lose consciousness, and he could hardly move a muscle to prevent it. His forearms and legs were the only things he could move, but they could not even reach Sahalik, much less do the elf any damage.

Let me help! Kayan's voice in his mind was overlaid with fear for his life.

Her panic, combined with his own, nearly made him accept her offer. Who cared if they blasted this hulk of an elf into bloody gobbets? But Jedra wasn't quite panicked enough to ignore the consequences of that.

No, Jedra told her, but that moment of contact gave him an idea. Their combined psionic power might be too dangerous to use, and his pushing ability was too weak to do much good by itself, but he did have one other talent he could employ on his own...

He focused his thoughts on Sahalik, forging a link with his adversary's mind, then when he saw the elf's eyes bulge with the same panic Jedra felt, he slapped his broken hand hard against the ground.

The pain that shot through his arm felt like molten lava running down the center of the bone. Jedra cried out in agony—but so did Sahalik. And for just an instant as the elf's muscles spasmed with empathic pain, his grip on Jedra's throat relaxed.

That was all the advantage Jedra needed. He heaved his body upward with all his might, overbalancing the elf and sending him over backward. Scrambling free before his opponent could grab him again, Jedra leaped over the fire to give himself a moment to recover his strength.

He had precious little left to recover. He gasped for air, his vision wavering even more than the flames before him, and his muscles all felt as if they were about to fall from his bones. He staggered to the left, struggling just to stay on his feet, but when Sahalik charged around the fire toward him he managed to run a couple of steps, then dodged sideways and stuck out his leg to trip the elf again.

This time Sahalik was ready for him. The elf warrior grabbed Jedra's outstretched leg, yanking it upward hard enough to pull his other leg completely off the ground too. Instead of letting him fall, Sahalik grabbed the other leg and spun around. Jedra felt his hands pass through the flames—once, twice, and a third time as Sahalik spun him around by his feet. He wondered if the elf warrior would throw him into the fire, but it soon became apparent that he had a more humiliating end in mind. Sahalik put all his effort into one more mighty swing, bringing Jedra's outstretched body down low, then releasing him on the upswing to fly completely over the heads of the astonished crowd.

Jedra, his arms outstretched by centrifugal force, arced gracefully over them like an acrobat between two trampolines, but there was no trampoline to catch him at the other end of his arc—only hard, unyielding ground. Fortunately the spin Sahalik had imparted turned Jedra sideways before he landed; otherwise he would have broken his other hand and probably both arms when he struck. As it was, the impact merely cracked a couple of ribs and knocked the breath out of him.

Kay an was the first to his side. She fought through the cheering crowd and knelt beside him. *Are you alive?* she asked.

Barely, Jedra answered. He groaned as he tried to sit up, but she pushed him back down.

Lie still. Let me heal your injuries before you try to move.

Jedra felt her make deeper contact with his mind. It was still nothing like the total sharing they were capable of, but her healing power required a link sufficient to control his body's healing processes and to transfer some of her own ability to him. Jedra gladly gave over his control to her and let his mind drift wherever she directed it. The pain in his ribs and in his hand slowly faded, and the ache in his throat as well. However, before Kayan could complete the job, the elves turned to see what had become of the vanquished half-elf, and she had to withdraw.

The chief stepped over to Jedra's side and extended a hand to help him up. Jedra looked to Kayan, and she nodded. *I think you'll be all right.* So Jedra accepted the hand—with his left, since it would be some time before his right hand healed completely—and rose shakily to his feet, Kayan helping to support him on the other side.

"Well fought," the chief said. "And since the tribe rules only that you must fight, not that you must win, I declare you fit to travel with us as far as you like." He nodded to Sahalik, who had stalked over to listen, and said, "By your own actions, you are honor bound to treat him as one of us. See that you do."

Sahalik frowned, then nodded toward Kayan. "What of this one?"

The chief was taken aback. "You cannot mean to challenge her as well?"

"No," Sahalik said. "She is human, and could never be part of the tribe. She will always be an outsider. Outsiders in the tribe must have a protector, and so I claim protectorship over her by right of conquest."

"But I don't claim you," Kayan said.

"You will learn to," Sahalik said, his voice low and menacing.

Kayan asked the chief, "What's this protectorship nonsense? I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself."

The chief hesitated, his sense of decency obviously at war with his sense of self-preservation. He didn't look like a chief at all anymore, just a tired old man who stood to lose his tribe over a stupid squabble. "Sahalik is talking about an old custom," he said, "wherein an outsider lives with a

member of the tribe in order to learn our ways. It is not always insisted upon, but since your own safety—and the safety of the tribe—often depends upon your knowledge of desert skills, it can be required.”

“Especially in times when the outsider may be with us for some time,” Sahalik said. “I would be more comfortable if I knew that this one followed our customs.”

“I bet you would,” Kayan said with a sneer.

Galar had been standing at the edge of the crowd; now he stepped forward and said, after a nervous gulp, “I will be her protector.”

“Not unless you want to challenge me,” Sahalik said.

“I—”

“Thanks, Galar,” Kayan cut him off before he could get himself into trouble, “but there’s no need for that.” She looked up at Sahalik, towering over her by at least three feet. “You’re just not going to take no for an answer, are you?”

He grinned wickedly. “I am not accustomed to it.”

Kayan nodded. “All right then, if you won’t leave me alone, let’s get this over with.” She let go of Jedra and stepped to Sahalik’s side.

Jedra nearly fell over, but the chief held him up. “Wha—?” Jedra tried to say, but his throat was still too sore to allow speech. *What’s this?* he demanded psionically. *You’re actually going to... to... with that barbarian?*

Don’t get your breechcloth in a knot, she thought back at him. *We’ve tried it your way; now let’s try it mine.* She reached out and took Sahalik’s hairy hand. “Come on, champion, show me this big tent of yours.”

The elves were totally silent as she led Sahalik away. The only noises Jedra could hear were the *scrunch, scrunch, scrunch* of their receding footsteps, the soft crackle of the fire, and the pounding of his own heart. Easily visible in the starlight, he could see the elf warrior hold open the flap of his tent for Kayan, and watched her step inside. The tent flap fell down behind Sahalik as he joined her.

Jedra felt a scream of rage building up inside him. He had fought that barbaric bully for *this*? To stand idly by and watch while Kayan went ahead

and gave him what he wanted anyway? It was too much to bear.

For a moment he thought he *had* screamed, but then he realized that the noise he heard came from another throat. Sahalik's, by the resonance of it, though terror had raised his usual husky pitch an octave or so. His tent suddenly bulged outward as if a herd of mekillots were trying to escape, first on one side, then the other. Finally with a twang of uprooted stays it collapsed backward. The fabric parted with a loud rip, and Sahalik blundered out, only to collide with the very next tent.

It slowed him for barely a moment. Still screeching like a lost child, he trampled right over the hapless tent and continued straight into the night, his cries receding until they were swallowed by the desert.

Another lump in Sahalik's tent wiggled a bit more, and a muffled curse came from it, then Kayan found the door and straightened up through it. Standing there amid the deflated fabric, she planted her hands on her hips and said, "Anybody else think I need a protector?"

* * *

The chief—still supporting Jedra—met her halfway between the fire and the tent. "What did you do to him?" he demanded. The rest of the tribe gathered around, and the expressions on their faces were as grim as his.

Kayan shrugged. "I let him see his true nature. I held a mirror to his mind and showed him what a pathetic creature he is."

"If you have harmed him—"

"I didn't touch him. I didn't do any psychic damage, either. I just gave him something to think about. I guess he decided he wanted to do his thinking alone."

The chief considered for a moment, then turned to the side. "Galar, Ralok, go after him and see that he comes to no harm. Bring him back when he recovers his wits."

Galar and another elf immediately slipped out of the group and ran out into the darkness in the direction Sahalik had gone.

The chief turned back to Kayan. “You were provoked, but your actions may have endangered a member of the tribe. You *do* need a protector, if only to guard *us* from *you*.” He laughed, but there was little humor in it. “Since I doubt if anyone else cares to dispute Sahalik for the honor, I will take responsibility for you myself.”

Kayan looked as if she were about to protest that, too, but she finally took a deep breath and said, “All right.”

The gathered elves murmured their approval at their chief’s wisdom and began to disperse. The chief said to Kayan, “First I will show you how to erect Sahalik’s tent and the other he knocked down. Then I will show you to your place in mine. You are to stay there when we are in camp, and you will march at my side when we travel. And when Sahalik returns, you will leave him alone.”

“Gladly,” Kayan said, “as long as he does the same for me.”

“I will see that he does.”

Jedra weaved outward, and Kayan reached out to steady him. “What of my companion?” she asked.

The chief sighed. “I suppose he should stay in my tent as well. Here, let us walk him there; I don’t think he would make it on his own.”

Jedra allowed them to drape his arms over their shoulders and carry him to the chief’s tent, where they laid him down on a mat at least three times as thick and much softer than the one he’d slept on last night. Or maybe it just felt that way after all his injuries, but whatever the case he felt himself sinking into it, but never remembered hitting bottom.

* * *

He woke to find the tent brightly lit with the first rays of morning sun. The interior glowed with soft, diffused warmth, and the walls rippled gently with the morning breeze. Jedra rose up and rubbed his eyes. The chief lived in luxury compared to the elves in the common tent. Hanging dividers separated the interior into rooms, each open overhead to the roof of the tent.

All the panels were decorated with elaborate stitchery or beadwork or painting, and the floor had been covered with thick furs. If the sorcerer-king of Urik were to spend a night in the desert, this was the sort of tent Jedra would expect him to have. His impression of the nomadic elves went up a notch as he took it all in.

Kayan lay on a separate mat beside him, still inhaling and exhaling the long, soft breaths of deep sleep. Jedra felt wide awake and perfectly healthy, which no doubt explained Kayan's exhaustion. She had finished healing him during the night.

There weren't any free rides in this world. Energy used for one thing had to come from somewhere else. With sorcery it was life-energy; every magical spell required the vital force of living things and life-giving elements to power it. Careful mages—preservers—took care to use only what the land could spare, but defilers used up everything around them, leaving only a circle of ash when they cast a spell. The streets of Urik were nearly impassable with potholes left over from defilers' magic.

Psionics didn't require external energy, but that ecological nicety exacted its price on the psionist. Every time Kayan or Jedra used their powers, it drained their own stamina. With mental contact and other simple skills that drain was hardly significant, but healing someone's injuries required a great deal from the psionist. Only rest could restore what the healer had lost. Small wonder if Kayan slept until noon—provided the elves would let her. Jedra was surprised they had allowed either of them to sleep in as long as they had; according to Galar they were usually up and moving long before dawn.

He rose quietly and left the tent to see if he could find out what was going on, but the first elves he saw gave him such chilly looks that he didn't ask. He found the community tent and recovered both his and Kayan's knapsacks, leaving their old sleeping mats behind; then he followed his nose to the food tent where he picked up a couple more of the crumbly cakes and filled their waterskins for the day's hike. They hadn't had time for breakfast yesterday, but today nobody seemed in a hurry. Still none of the elves spoke with Jedra—in fact, when they saw him coming they got

out of his way. Maybe they're just embarrassed at their behavior last night, Jedra thought. They should have been. Next time Sahalik decided to beat up on someone, Jedra would enjoy shouting "Fight, fight, fight!" as they had done and see how they liked it.

He took the food and knapsacks back to the chief's tent and set them down beside Kayan. He nibbled his cake slowly, watching her sleep. She looked so innocent there, her head resting in the crook of her arm and her face pressed into the mat, her small, round human nose pushed to the side and her straight brown hair falling over her eyes. Jedra let his gaze drift down over her loosely shrouded body. Even through her robe he could see how curvaceous she was. Small wonder Sahalik had been attracted. Jedra was, too, but at least he had the decency to wait for her to return his interest.

Or was it unwillingness to believe that she might actually feel the same way about him? Jedra had grown up on the streets; his home had been a nook in a wall at the end of a dead-end alley. People with his background usually didn't associate with templar women. His and Kayan's time together in a slave pen had brought them both down to the same social level—the very bottom—but it hadn't erased their pasts. Now that they were in the lap of luxury again, Jedra felt completely out of place, while Kayan would no doubt feel right at home.

Actually, considering her former station, she would probably think *this* was still roughing it. But would she accept it, and Jedra, as part of her new life? He couldn't make himself believe that she would.

There was their age difference to consider, too. Jedra was at least three years younger than Kayan, maybe more. He'd had to grow up fast to make it on his own in the city, but he was still naive about a lot of things that she had probably experienced many times. Did she find that attractive, or would she become bored with him? He didn't know that, either.

The richly appointed tent made Jedra nervous. He got up and went back outside, and this time he stopped the first elf he saw—one of the old women who couldn't get out of his way in time—and asked why the tribe wasn't moving out at dawn.

She peered at him through eyes gone white in patches, but Jedra got the impression she was looking deeper than the surface level anyway. Finally she sniffed and said, "We're waitin' on Sahalik. He's not back yet."

"Oh," Jedra said. He felt a mixture of relief and anxiety. He didn't necessarily want to see the big elf again, but on the other hand, if anything had happened to him, Kayan would be responsible. "How about Galar?" he asked. "Has he returned?"

The woman started to laugh, but it turned into a dry, hacking cough. When she got it under control she said, "Come and gone again, hours ago. The night creatures chased him and Ralok back to camp before they tracked Sahalik more than a mile, but they went back out as soon as it was safe."

"Oh," Jedra said again. No, this wasn't good at all. "Thank you," he told the woman, then he went straight back into the tent.

Kayan was still asleep. "Wake up," he said, shaking her softly by the shoulder. "Kayan, wake up." When she didn't stir, he shook her a bit harder, but she didn't respond.

Kayan, he mindsent.

Mmmm?

Kayan, wake up. We have to find Sahalik.

Mmmm-mmmm.

Come on, this is important! He shook her again, but she didn't awaken. He felt the mindlink break, and when he tried again he couldn't make contact. Evidently Kayan had blocked him out. He didn't even know if she had understood him, or if she was just too much in need of sleep to be roused.

Well, maybe he could do something by himself. He didn't have nearly the control that Kayan had, but he could still make mental contact with people. Much as he hated the idea, maybe he could track down Sahalik and persuade him to return. Or failing that, he might at least be able to find out if the elf was all right.

Jedra tried to orient himself inside the tent. The fire pit was beyond the wall to his right, and Sahalik's tent was behind him and a bit to the right as

well. Sahalik had run away from the fire and over another tent, which would mean he had gone more or less directly to Jedra's left. To the east. Jedra sat cross-legged on his sleeping mat facing that direction and closed his eyes so he could concentrate.

The first time he had gone on a psionic voyage, it had felt like he was dreaming. He had found himself face down in a crystal-clear pool of water, a pool so impossibly large he had actually floated in it. Far away at the bottom of the pool had been the desert floor, over which he had drifted like a cloud in a breeze. He tried to recapture that image now, tried to become a cloud, or a bird like the second time he'd gone voyaging with Kayan. Now that he was concentrating on it of course it was harder to do, but the camp was quiet and the tent peaceful enough; eventually he felt his consciousness drift free of his body and begin to rise.

The camp receded below him, the dozen or more sand-colored tents of varying sizes looking more like an outcrop of rock than anything. Puzzled, Jedra swooped down and realized that the camp *was* a rock outcrop, at least in his psionic vision. The insectlike kanks in their pens beyond the tents had become dung beetles, then metamorphosed into ants as he rose into the sky. Great.

He couldn't count on any correspondence with reality, then. Except for one thing: himself. He was still a half-elf in a light blue robe, seated in midair on a rectangular sleeping mat. He gripped the edges so he wouldn't fall off and directed the mat upward.

The elves themselves registered in the vision as long, slender, silvery funnels reaching upward toward him. Jedra knew from previous experience in the slave caravan that if he flew down any of those funnels he would find himself mindlinked with the person at the base of it, or at least making preliminary contact. When he and Kayan had done this while mentally joined the funnels had been great wide things, and when they flew down one they found themselves seeing through the eyes and hearing through the ears of whomever they encountered, but Jedra couldn't do that alone. Many times he couldn't even recognize who he'd contacted, in which case he

couldn't make his presence known, but if it was someone he knew then he could usually at least send them a message.

He stopped rising when the elf camp was a mere speck in the desert. Sahalik had gone east, so Jedra turned toward the golden apple the rising sun had become and began to move across the crumpled gray cloth of the dunes. He saw two more funnels a few miles out—Galar and Ralok, no doubt—but he didn't see any more beyond that. Sahalik had been moving pretty fast, though; he could have gone a long way in an entire night.

The air blew Jedra's robe into billowing folds behind him. The fringe at the edge of the mat flapped in the wind, too, but the mat itself only undulated a little. Jedra slowly began to relax, but he never let go his grip on the edge. He didn't think falling off in a psionic vision would be fatal, but he didn't know for sure, and it was a long way down...

After he had traveled for ten or fifteen minutes straight east, he began to wonder if he had missed his quarry. At the speed he was flying, he must have covered a full day's march and then some; if Sahalik were out here, he should have found him by now. Of course Sahalik might not have continued straight east. He had been in a panic, after all; he might have started running in circles for all Jedra knew. So he turned to the south and flew along in that direction for a few minutes, then turned west for just a mile or two, then back north again. He swept back and forth through the dreamscape, crisscrossing the desert in search of any hint of a silvery funnel, but he found nothing.

At last, exhausted from the effort, he turned back toward the elf camp, thinking that he might be able to rouse Kayan and the two of them might be able to search more thoroughly. The sun was considerably higher now, but he banked around and put it behind him, then swept back across the desert, keeping his eye out for the rock outcrop that would be the tents. But after he'd flown a few minutes and still not found it he began to wonder if he had overshot. Or possibly he had gone too far north or south; he'd zigzagged back and forth so much he really didn't know where he was anymore.

Well this is silly, he thought. All I have to do is open my eyes and I'll be back in the tent. He tried it, but he found that he had to close his eyes

first to even make the attempt, and when he opened them he was right back in the vision. If he swung his arms below the mat he didn't encounter tent floor, either, just more air.

The beginnings of panic closed in on him, but he fought it down and tried to think of his options. The elf camp was full of minds, so taken together they should make a single enormous funnel that would extend up well above the horizon; maybe if he thought of it that way he could see a silvery, shimmering vortex or something off in the distance.

Sure enough, now that he was looking for that instead of the rock outcrop, he could see it clearly to the south. He directed his mat toward it, faster now because he could feel himself growing tired from the extended psionic voyage, but when he drew closer he realized he had made a mistake. This funnel didn't issue from the ground; it came from a source high in the sky. Jedra veered to the side and circled around it. It looked like a tangle of thorny vines, a dense knot of sharp points that said clear as words: Do not touch. Jedra wondered what it looked like in the real world. Was it a creature of some sort, or maybe another psionist or wizard flying between cities on kings' business? Maybe those thorns were the psionic representation of magical wards.

The silvery vortex twisted around toward him. Jedra wasn't sure if he wanted to make contact, but whoever it was might have spotted Sahalik. Whether or not that person would deign to speak with Jedra was anybody's guess, but Jedra didn't suppose it would hurt to try.

He flew into the maw of the vortex. The mat bucked, and Jedra hung on tight, but then he felt the familiar sliding sensation as he fell into contact with the other mind, and—

Wham.

Intense rage, directed straight at Jedra's unprotected mind. Rage and some kind of force as well; it felt as if his head were suddenly full of pressure, as if it were going to explode at any second. Pain and terror accomplished what his imagination had not: he tumbled off his mat to land heavily on his side—right on top of Kayan.

That in turn did what his earlier shaking could not. Kayan cried out in panic and struggled to sit up, shoving Jedra aside and striking out with her hands at the same time as she directed some sort of psionic attack at him. Jedra ducked her blow, but he couldn't duck the wave of unreasonable panic that passed through him, a brief surge of terror as if he'd just realized he was about to die. The sensation momentarily paralyzed him, and Kayan's shove sent him tumbling off her to the floor of the tent.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

Shaking his head to clear it—he wasn't going to die after all, it seemed—Jedra sat up and said, "I was looking for Sahalik."

"By climbing all over me?" she asked sarcastically.

"No, no, I fell on you when the—whatever it was attacked me."

"The whatever it was?" Kayan rubbed her eyes and looked around the interior of the tent.

"Not here," Jedra protested. "I was in a psionic vision, searching for Sahalik. I couldn't find him, but I saw what I thought might be another psionist, so I thought I'd ask if *he'd* seen him, but when I tried to make contact he attacked me."

"Not surprising, if you approached him like you did me," Kayan said. She glowered at him a moment longer, then she saw the cake waiting for her at the head of her mat and her expression softened a bit. She picked up the cake and took a bite of it. Around a mouthful of crumbs she said, "So why were you looking for Sahalik? You want a rematch?"

Jedra was getting a little upset at her caustic attitude, but he told himself she had just been awakened suddenly and had jumped to a false conclusion, so he would give her a few minutes to come around. "He's still missing," he told her, "and the elves are worried about him. They've delayed the morning march until they can find him."

She laughed. "Hah, good luck to 'em. He's probably halfway to the Ringing Mountains by now."

"What do you mean? What did you do to him?"

Kayan ate another bite of cake. She watched Jedra as she ate, as if sizing him up to see how much she wanted to tell him. When she swallowed, she simply said, “I used an old templar trick we sometimes used on prisoners and such to make ’em cooperative.”

“What kind of trick?” Jedra asked, but Kayan only smiled coyly and took another bite of cake.

“What’s this?” Jedra asked. “Are you going to start hiding things from me now?”

She looked away at the stitchery on the tent wall beside her. “Is it hiding things to protect you from yourself?” She looked back at him, her expression serious. “Jedra, every time I teach you something, you use it to get into trouble. We need somebody with some experience at this to help us before we start playing with dangerous abilities.”

Jedra supposed there was some truth to what she said, but it still annoyed him to be considered the dumb half of the team. “Look here,” he said, “I’m not the only one who gets us into trouble. If you’d turned down Sahalik gently instead of getting all high and mighty about it, I never would have had to go look for him.”

“You think so?” Kayan flipped her hair back behind her ears with a haughty shake of her head. “Try living in a woman’s body for a dozen years, and then maybe I’ll listen to your advice. In my experience, men don’t take no for an answer unless you make it *very* clear you mean it.”

“You certainly made it clear enough to Sahalik. The trouble is, now the whole tribe is afraid of us.”

“Is that necessarily a bad—?”

A cry from just outside the tent interrupted her. It was in elvish, a single word that sounded like “Chimbu!” Neither Jedra nor Kayan knew what it meant, but other voices picked up the cry and soon the whole camp was shouting it.

“Maybe Sahalik has come back,” Jedra said. He was about to get up to go see, but before he had risen more than a few inches off his sleeping mat something made a swooshing sound that drowned out even the elves’ cries

of alarm, and a thick rope edged with spines slashed through the tent. If Jedra had been standing it would have taken off his head, but as it was the rope merely ripped away the top of the tent at the four-foot level. The remaining walls slumped to the ground like clothing taken off and dropped at day's end.

The sudden sunlight made Jedra squint, but a moment later the sun disappeared behind a triangular silhouette. Was that the top of the tent blowing away? No, the tent was over to the side, a small rag still dangling from the spikes at the end of the thick rope that issued from the base of the triangle. A quick twitch of the rope from side to side shook the tent free, and Jedra suddenly realized the rope was a tail, and the dark triangle was some kind of flying creature.

A loud boom rolled over the desert: the whip-crack of the thing's tail. Jedra revised his estimate of its size. The creature was enormous. It must have been a hundred feet across.

The elves were screaming in terror. Archers fired arrows at the thing, but the arrows seemed to slow just before they hit it, then fall back to the ground.

Over the cry of the elves, Kayan shouted, "That wasn't a psionacist you found while you were out looking for Sahalik, that was a cloud ray!"

Jedra felt a sinking feeling in his gut. "What's a cloud ray?" he asked, but he already knew the important thing: it was trouble.

Kayan confirmed it. "They're carnivorous, and they use psionic levitation to fly around looking for food. They normally leave people on the ground alone, but they *hate* other psionics users. When they encounter one, they almost always try to kill him."

Jedra looked at the creature again. It was mostly wing, with a thick ridge down the center between its bulging head and its whip tail. It was hard to tell with the glare of the sun directly behind it, but it looked like the underside was mostly white, blending into a light brownish green near the edges. Muscles rippled when it flapped its leathery wings. It couldn't have flown by just flapping alone—it was far too large and shaped wrong for that

—but evidently that was how it maneuvered. It banked silently around, exposing the sun again. Jedra's eyes watered, and he sneezed.

"It hates psionics? Then how do we fight it?" he asked, looking away.

"Not with longbows, that's for sure," Kayan said. The elves were figuring that out, too. Their arrows were doing more damage to the tribe when they fell back to the ground than to the cloud ray. The chief—standing among the warriors on a dune top—shouted something, and they tried firing over the top of the ray and letting their arrows fall on its upper surface, but the mysterious barrier slowed them from above, too.

The other elves began scattering out into the desert, either trying to get better angles to pierce the ray's invisible armor or just trying to get away before it came around and attacked the camp again. That would be soon; despite its size, the thing was fast. And deadly. Its spiky tail could cut a person in two without even slowing down.

"We've got to link up," Jedra said. "If we don't do something, it could kill the whole tribe."

He looked back up at the aerial monster, now turned to expose a mouth wide enough to swallow a dozen people at once. Four jet-black eyes, two on either side of the mouth, seemed to lock on to his own. The cloud ray flapped its wide, leathery wings again and began to descend, obviously not content with a single attack.

"I think you're right," Kayan said.

Jedra closed his eyes and reached out toward her with his mind. He felt her presence, another source of consciousness alongside his own, then he felt a sudden rush and the two coalesced into a single entity. He retained some of his own point of view, and he felt her viewpoint as a separate thing as well, but they came together like the vision in two eyes joining to form a single picture in the mind.

The being they had become vibrated with energy. They felt it coursing through them in ever-strengthening pulses, bathing their psyches with

sensual waves of delicious power. They were exultant, they were invincible, they were life itself, born to conquer the forces of death and destruction.

They rose upward from the desert floor, becoming a swift, powerful bird of prey. Overhead, the cloud ray was a lumbering balloon of flesh, wallowing through the air by comparison with their darting flight.

It holds the arrows off with an inertial barrier, the Kayan part of their combined being thought. If we can remove its shield, the elves can kill it.

With that thought, their perception of the cloud ray altered. Now they could see a green shroud enveloping its balloonlike form, nearly invisible when viewed straight on, but easily discernible around the edges. Kayan and Jedra climbed toward the creature, talons extended to rip the shroud apart, but when they reached it they found it sticky and resilient rather than easily shredded.

The cloud ray reacted instantly to their contact. Screeching in anger, it expanded its entire body, doubling in size almost instantaneously and slamming into them. They tumbled backward, flapping madly to stay aloft, and when they righted themselves and banked around they could see that the green shroud was even stronger than before.

The cloud ray swooped toward the ground, renewing its attack on the source of the psionic power that had approached it.

Don't let it get close enough to use that tail again! Jedra thought. If the ray made another pass, it could level the entire camp, him and Kayan included.

In the psionic vision the elven camp was a maelstrom of activity, the tiny vortices of intelligent minds darting about and tiny lightning bolts that had to be arrows rising up toward the cloud ray and bouncing off. Jedra and Kayan flew ahead of the ray, ignoring the lightning bolts, which passed right through their bird-of-prey body. They wouldn't feel any physical object unless it hit their real bodies in the tent; only psionic forces had any reality in the vision.

Everything they saw there was a manifestation of their minds. When the cloud ray expanded, it had been resisting their mental contact and

strengthening its inertial barrier. Now as Jedra and Kayan tried to stop its descent by projecting a physical force against it with their minds, their own body in the vision grew larger with each wing-beat until they were as big, then even bigger than, the ray. With powerful strokes of their wings they blew it back into the sky, but the ray responded with a blast of wind that drove it back toward the ground.

Quick, push it down instead of up, they thought, and they swooped up and over its back, digging their talons into the sticky inertial barrier and flapping hard to shove it downward. The ray plummeted toward the elven camp, screeching with rage as it tried to reverse the winds, but it didn't have time. Jedra and Kayan managed to steer it away from the camp itself and toward a gap in the roiling vortices below, then they put everything they had into one last colossal wingbeat, driving it full speed into the sand.

They got more force than they expected. The cloud ray streaked toward the ground, and Jedra and Kayan barely managed to let go and veer aside before it hit.

The impact shook even the dreamscape. Thunder rolled across the desert, blasting Kayan and Jedra out of their link only to be tumbled across the floor of the tent by the real earthquake.

Slowly, their minds disoriented and their bodies aching with sudden fatigue, they staggered to their feet and looked around them. Not a single tent had remained upright. Pieces of canvas lay strewn across the sand for hundreds of yards; evidently the wind the cloud ray had produced had had a real counterpart. Elves lay strewn everywhere as well, most of them rising shakily to their feet now that the battle was over. The kank pen had been trampled and the kanks had fled, except for the ones that had been injured either by flying debris or by their fellows.

However, the worst scene of destruction by far was the site of the cloud ray's impact. It had hit with enough force to dig a crater, scattering gouts of sand and chunks of its body all around. Jedra was awestricken by the magnitude of what he and Kayan had done, but then he saw something that sickened him instead: one of the elves hadn't been able to dodge the flying debris. Only his head and shoulders stuck out from the huge oblong mass of

bone and flesh that pinned him down. It was the cloud ray's head, Jedra realized.

The elf wasn't dead. He screamed in pain and tried to wriggle free, but he was trapped. The other elves ran toward him and began digging frantically in the sand, trying to pull him out, but the immense weight of the head just sank it deeper with every handful they scooped away. The elves switched their digging to the downhill side of the head, trying to roll it off their companion, but it was so huge Jedra didn't see how they could budge it.

"We did it again!" he whispered furiously to Kayan. "We let our power get out of control and we hurt someone."

Kayan took a step toward the digging elves. "Maybe we can help now. Push the... thing aside, or..."

"No." Jedra grabbed her by the shoulder. "If we link up again, there's no telling what might happen."

"Then let's help dig. We can't just stand here and watch him die," she said, and she began picking her way through the wreckage of the tents toward the pinned elf.

Jedra followed her, but the elves stopped them when they drew near. "Get back," one warrior snarled, drawing his sword. "You've done enough damage. Harat is dying, thanks to you."

"I'm a healer," Kayan said. "I can keep him alive while you dig."

The warrior considered a moment, then stood aside, but he didn't sheathe his sword. "See that you do," he said, "or you will die with him."

Kayan sized him up with a look that seemed to say, "Not likely," but she didn't push it. Instead she bent down to the pinned elf. He was no longer screaming, but his face was still contorted in a grimace of pain, and his breathing was fast and shallow. His skin was pale, too, for an elf.

"I'm going to make you sleep," Kayan told him. "Try not to fight it. When you wake up, you'll be out of here, and all your injuries will be healed."

The elf shook his head. “I can’t... feel my legs. Not even you can heal that.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Kayan said, placing her hands on his head. The elf closed his eyes and his breathing slowed. When he was completely unconscious, Kayan turned to the elf warrior who still stood over her with his sword drawn and said, “You’d be more use to him digging. He’s bleeding inside, and I can’t stop that until we get him out of here.”

The warrior growled something in elvish, but he sheathed his sword and walked around to join in the digging.

Jedra did the same. He had to stifle an involuntary laugh when he first saw how the elves were digging—they had bent down and were throwing sand backward between their legs like a pack of rasclinn burrowing for roots—but when he tried it himself he realized that was the best way to move a lot of sand in a hurry.

The sand was sticky and colored red with the cloud ray’s blood. It smelled of metals and exotic spices. Jedra had expected it to smell awful, but the creature had been alive only minutes before; it hadn’t had time to putrefy yet. Give it a day in the direct sun, though, and the stench from a carcass this size would be unbearable for miles around.

The ragged wall of flesh above him began to shift, and the elves leaped back out of the way. Jedra slipped and had a horrifying moment as he imagined it rolling over and trapping *him*, but one of the elves snatched at his arm and pulled him free just as the head rolled into the trench he had helped dig.

It had moved only a few feet, but that was enough to lift the other side off the injured elf and allow the diggers to pull him free. Kayan knelt beside him, running her hands along his torso and legs to assess his injuries while the elves looked on.

The chief had arrived and was scowling at the whole proceedings. Jedra tried to stay out of his way, but he knew he wasn’t going unnoticed. Everyone who had gathered there kept eyeing him distrustfully and muttering to one another.

Kayan held her hands against the elf's abdomen and dosed her eyes. Jedra knew what she was doing now: pouring more of her own life energy into her patient while she tried to heal his bleeding and his spinal damage. Everyone else watched the elf for signs of recovery, but Jedra kept his eyes on Kayan. There was a limit to how much energy she could spare.

After a few minutes in the healing trance, she leaned back with a weary sigh and opened her eyes. "He'll live," she said to the chief. "He'll even walk again, but you should give him a couple of days to rest before you make him march the way we did yesterday."

The chief laughed bitterly and waved his arms to encompass the devastated camp. The elves who hadn't helped dig had erected a couple of the tents again, but most of the shelters were still in shredded heaps on the ground. "It will take at least that long before we can repair the damage," the chief said.

"Good," Kayan said. "Then let's get him out from under the hot sun and let him sleep."

Under her direction, six elves picked up the injured one and carried him carefully down into the camp, where they laid him inside one of the tents. Kayan went in to help finish his healing, and Jedra followed her.

"How are you holding up?" he asked her.

She shrugged. "All right. Tired, but I'll be fine after another night's sleep."

Jedra knelt down beside her. "You've been putting out a lot more energy than I have; let's link back up and I'll share some of mine with you."

She considered it. He could see it in the way her eyes unfocused and her face relaxed for a second. Oh, yes, to merge their minds and become that supreme being again, to feel strength and power spread through them like fire through dry tinder...

She shook her head. "No. It always costs more than we get out of it."

True enough, Jedra supposed. But still he yearned for the experience, especially now when he was already drained from doing it once today. The memory of how it had felt overrode even the immediate here-and-now

reminder of its price. He was glad Kayan had the willpower to resist it; left to himself he might not.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll sleep and recover our energy that way instead.”

He lay down to attempt just that, but it seemed he’d hardly closed his eyes when he heard something thud to the ground just outside the tent. Then the door flap was pulled aside, and the chief stuck his head in the opening. “Come out,” he said.

Jedra and Kayan exchanged a puzzled glance, then rose and stepped out of the tent. There on the ground just outside the door was the source of the noise they had heard: their knapsacks. Twenty or thirty elves stood silently in a semicircle around the tent door, and they didn’t look happy.

The chief didn’t waste time on a lengthy speech. “For saving Harat’s life, we have decided to let you live,” he said. “But only if you leave... *now.*”

CHAPTER THREE

They made it almost a mile before Kayan collapsed. In the hot middle of the day with the relentless sun beating down on them, Jedra was surprised she'd made it that far. He wasn't sure how much farther he could go himself, but the chief's final words had kept him walking long after he normally would have stopped.

"If we ever see you again," the chief had said, "we will bury you up to your necks in the sand and let the carrion eaters feast on your roasted brains."

That's gratitude for you, Jedra had nearly said, but he had decided to hold his tongue while he still had one. Some of the elves wanted blood.

Galar had come to their rescue one last time, insisting that the tribe give them food and water enough to keep them alive until they reached civilization. When some of the other elves protested, the chief had compromised on three days' provisions, which he said was enough to get them to an oasis. When Galar left to pack the food he even gave them directions for finding it—at the base of a long, rocky ridge just south of due west—but what they did from there was up to them. They would just have to figure that out when the time came; right now they had more immediate problems.

Jedra bent down beside Kayan, letting his shadow fall across her while he worked her pack off and helped her lean back against it. He removed his own pack and got out the waterskin, gave her a swallow of its precious contents, and put it back without drinking any himself. The oasis might be three days away for an elf, but he had the feeling they would need every drop of water they had and then some before he and Kayan managed to reach it.

To think that he had bathed in a barrel of the stuff only two days ago. The elves had been right: fortunes changed quickly in the desert.

Theirs were going to have to change back awfully fast or the two of them would be dead of heat stroke or dehydration by nightfall. Jedra didn't see much opportunity for shelter in the immediate vicinity, only gently rolling dunes and occasional rock outcrops as far as he could see in any direction, dotted here and there with stubby bushes and gnarled, spiny cacti. He didn't see any of the barrel-shaped plants like the one the elf child had cut open for water yesterday, nor anything else that looked promising. All the vegetation he could see was too thin to have a pulpy core. Too thin to provide shade, either, which was an even more pressing need at the moment.

Kayan moaned and tried to sit up.

"Stay there," Jedra told her. "We wouldn't get twenty paces in this heat before we had to stop again. I can see that far, and there's nothing better over there." He spoke aloud, even though mindspeech would have been easier. He still felt so drained from the battle with the cloud ray that he didn't want to use even that little bit of psionic energy.

Either Kayan felt the same way, or she just followed his example. "We have to keep moving," she whispered.

"We have to sleep and recover our strength," he said. "Once we've done that, *then* we can start walking again. We'll start at dusk, like the elves do."

"I suppose that does make sense," she admitted.

Jedra looked around again, trying to think like an elf. What would they do in a similar situation? Spend the hot hours in the shade, for starters, but the Jura-Dai's generosity hadn't extended to a tent.

Or had it? He looked again at the thin, spiny cactus growing only a few yards away. It branched in two about four feet off the ground, and each arm extended out and upward another four or five feet. If he were to stretch his robe across those arms, the thorns would hold it in place and the cloth—even as thin as it was—would provide shade.

There was only one problem with that idea: he'd seen how some of the desert plants protected themselves by swinging their thorny arms at

passersby. He wasn't sure if this was one of that kind, but he didn't want to find out the hard way.

Hmm. How could he tell whether or not it was dangerous without getting too close? Throw rocks at it?

It was worth a try. Jedra found a small outcrop not far from the cactus and picked up a flat slab of flagstone a little bigger than his hand. He didn't see the multilegged beetle that had been hiding under it until it clicked angrily at him, startling him into dropping the rock on his toe. The beetle scurried under another slab of flagstone, and Jedra once again picked up the piece it had been under to begin with, making a mental note to check more carefully before he grabbed something like that again. Even the smallest desert creatures had some kind of defense against predators, and most of them were poisonous.

He carried the rock to within easy throwing distance of the cactus, took aim, and tossed it at the trunk. The rock thunked into it and broke off a few spines, but the branches never moved. Hmm. Maybe it wasn't the mobile kind, but Jedra still wasn't convinced. He could try all day to see if the cactus was dangerous, but even if all his tests came up negative, he would never be certain he hadn't missed something obvious. Only if it *did* prove to be dangerous somehow would he know for sure.

He wished there was some way to check it out psionically. Look for an aura or something. There probably *was* a way, but if so he didn't know it. He sometimes got premonitions of danger, but that was another of those things that was useful only when something actually happened. He'd found himself spooking at shadows—or in trouble without warning—far too many times to count on his premonitions. Maybe a psionics master would be able to help him refine that talent, but unless the refinements included reaching back in time to warn himself, that wasn't going to help him now.

The heat was getting unbearable. He was going to have to do something, or he and Kayan would cook.

Feeling helpless and stupid, but not knowing what else to try, he stripped off his robe and waved it at the cactus. It still made no motion, even when he got right next to it. Finally he tossed one end of the robe out

and let the thorns at the end of one arm catch it, then he tugged downward. The cactus flexed a little, but that was it.

That was as good as he could do. He walked around to the other side, trailing the robe and spreading it out to make the biggest possible shadow. Stretched out like that it was nearly square, and now he noticed that the hems were extra thick to allow the thorns to hold it fast without tearing. He was willing to bet the elves had designed the garments that way for just this purpose.

Ha. He was learning. He just hoped he could learn fast enough to keep himself and Kayan alive.

He helped her move over to the patch of shade, then sat down beside her to wait out the hottest part of the day. But when he leaned back against his knapsack, she said, "We should sleep in alternate shifts."

"Good point," he said, sitting up again. "You go ahead, and I'll take the first watch." He didn't know what he would be able to do if anything approached, since the elves hadn't given them any weapons, but he refrained from mentioning that to Kayan. Let her sleep without worry if she could; she needed the rest..

She curled up on the ground, her robe still protecting her light skin from the bright reflections off the sand, and within minutes her breathing slowed and her muscles relaxed. Jedra yawned, then forced himself to look away and concentrate on something else.

The desert was quiet, but not silent. When he listened hard, he could hear the faint clicks of rocks expanding in the heat, the clattering of tiny bugs, and the occasional rustle of a not-so-tiny bug or lizard scurrying from one piece of shade to another. Breezes flapped the loose ends of his robe, and every few minutes a fly would circle around until he chased it off.

The smells were more subtle, masked as they were beneath the ever-present aroma of sun-baked sand and his own sweat, but when he concentrated Jedra could pick out the faint spiciness of the cactus providing their shade, and even the dry, strawlike scent wafting off the few patches of wispy grass that grew on the dunes.

Another smell took longer to identify, but he finally realized it was the remains of the perfume the elven women had added to their bathwater. He bent down and inhaled close to Kayan's hair. Mmm, yes.

He let her sleep through the hottest part of the day, waking her only when the sun had moved far enough that she was no longer in the shade. They moved over a few feet and traded places; he slept while she kept watch. She woke him when the sun was still an hour from the horizon. "We should probably get moving," she said. "This is about when the elves started their evening march."

Jedra sat up and rubbed his eyes. He still felt tired, but even a couple hours of sleep had helped tremendously. He could probably put another five or six miles behind him before he tired again. He took a swig from his water-skin and passed it to Kayan, and they shared the first of the honeycakes Galar had packed for them. He'd given them a dozen; they could each eat two a day.

When they'd eaten the last crumbs and washed them down with a sip of water, Jedra said "Let me take down my robe and we can go," but that proved more difficult than he'd expected. The cactus thorns had tiny barbs pointing toward their bases, and the breeze had flapped the fabric enough that it was stuck to hundreds of them. Jedra and Kayan both tried to work his robe free, but the thorns wouldn't let go without a great deal of wiggling and spreading of the weave. Most of them were out of reach anyway, so Jedra finally wound up simply tugging the robe down. It came free with a loud rip, leaving dozens of tatters of cloth behind in the cactus.

Jedra held up the robe to inspect the damage and was annoyed to find that the worst tears were in the back, where they would let tomorrow's sun through to his already-tender skin.

"So much for that wonderful idea," he said. He picked up his pack and slung it over his shoulders, noticing how its rough fabric chafed his back.

Kayan put on her pack as well. "We needed the shade," she said. "You did what you had to do. Tomorrow we'll figure out something different."

"I hope so." He turned toward the sinking sun and began to walk.

He set a pace much slower than the elves had, but one that he hoped would ultimately be just as productive. If he and Kayan could keep from exhausting themselves, they would make better time than if they had to stop and rest all the time.

His strategy paid off for the first couple of hours. Luck was with them, too; when the sun sank below the horizon in front of them, Guthay, one of Athas's two moons, rose behind them and continued to provide light. After the day's brilliance, its golden glow was a welcome change. It was a little more difficult to see where they were going under its softer illumination, but there didn't seem to be much to worry about. The plant life was thinning out the farther west they went, and they saw little else but an occasional pile of bones where some poor animal had evidently starved and scavengers had picked the carcass clean.

They walked side by side and kept their eyes on the sky almost as much as the ground, trying to navigate by the stars. That turned out to be a bad idea; Jedra had become mesmerized by the brilliant stars when he suddenly felt a sting in the arch of his left foot.

"Ow!" he yelled and jumped backward, but he nearly fell over when his foot refused to lift.

"What the—?" He tugged on his foot, but each tug sent a lance of pain up his leg.

"What is it?" Kayan asked.

"Something's got me!" he shouted, pulling harder.

It felt as if something were trying to pull his bones out through the sole of his foot. It wasn't pulling on his sandal; whatever it was had penetrated the leather sole and stuck deep in his foot. He managed to lift it a few inches off the ground, but it simply wouldn't come any farther, and now he could see a thin cord or a root or something leading into the sand.

In full-scale panic now, he yanked backward with all his might and finally pulled free of whatever had snared him. It looked like a cactus spine with a thumbnail-sized hunk of his leather sandal and some of his skin still

attached. He staggered backward, his left foot on fire—and stepped on another spine with his right foot.

“Ye-ow!” he screeched, and he wrenched free of it with one mighty jerk.

“Jedra!” Kayan took a step toward him.

“Don’t move!” He bent down and brushed the hem of his robe cautiously over the sand, and sure enough, it hung up on another thorn sticking up between them. He swung the cloth around in as wide an arc as it would reach and encountered three more of the strange spines a foot or so apart.

“It grows underground,” Kayan said, her voice full of wonder.

Jedra could hardly stand on his feet. Pain and anger made him snap at her, “Of course it grows underground. *Everything* is hostile in this damned desert, even the land itself, and the sooner we realize that the longer we’ll live.”

A little taken aback, she said, “Jedra, I know that. But neither of us could have known about this.”

“We should have suspected it,” he said, twisting around without moving his feet. “I wonder how far back it goes? As far apart as the thorns are, we could have been walking right through them for the last ten paces or so.”

“True,” she said. She bent down and swept the hem of her robe over her tracks. When she didn’t encounter a thorn, she took a step back the way they had come and swept the robe out again, and this time it snagged on a spine just an inch or two from a footprint. She gingerly stepped over it and moved on.

Wincing at the pain in his feet, Jedra did the same until they stopped encountering thorns. The patch of them was only six or eight feet across, it turned out, but there was nothing visible to indicate that it was there, save for the thin needles that were the same color as the sand.

Jedra immediately sat down and slipped off his sandals. Both feet had big red patches surrounding the puncture wounds, which bled steadily even

when he squeezed. Under the moonlight his blood made dark rivulets across his skin, and where it dripped on the sand it made black circles.

“Here, let me see that,” Kayan said. She bent close and took his right foot, turning it so the moonlight shone on the sole. “Does it still hurt, or is it just bleeding?” she asked, pressing on either side of the puncture.

“Ow!” he yowled. “Yes, it still hurts.”

“Shush. Something might hear you.” She held the foot in both hands and concentrated on it, and presently the pain began to ease, but the bleeding continued unabated. “That’s strange,” Kayan said. “There’s something interfering with your blood’s ability to clot. The cactus must have injected it with something. I wonder why it would do that?”

“Spite,” Jedra said.

Kayan laughed. “It’s a plant.”

“So?”

She shook her head and bent back to her work. She had to work at it for a couple of minutes, but eventually the bleeding stopped and the pain lessened until it was more like a bee sting than a gaping wound. Jedra watched, fascinated, as the hole the thorn had ripped on its way out closed up, healing at hundreds of times the normal rate.

“That’s good,” he said at last. “Stop! You’ll wear yourself out again.”

“I hope not,” she said. “I still have your other foot to do.” She let his right one go and scooted around to do his left.

Jedra watched her stop the bleeding again, but this time he felt a wave of uneasiness pass over him. He looked away, but the sensation continued to grow. It wasn’t nausea; this was more like alarm. Something was wrong. He couldn’t imagine what it could be, though. The pain was going away just like in the other foot.

Even so, he couldn’t shake the sensation of impending disaster. Maybe it didn’t have anything to do with his foot. It felt a little like the feeling he sometimes got when someone was watching him, but out here in the desert? There wasn’t anything for miles around.

Or was there? Jedra scanned the sandy horizon beyond Kayan, then twisted around to check behind him.

“Hold still,” Kayan said.

There. Just around the edge of a wind-hollowed dune about thirty feet away, Jedra sensed a presence. “Something’s out there,” he said.

Kayan looked up. “What? Where?”

“Over—” But Jedra didn’t need to point. The moment its cover was blown, a b’rohlg leaped out from behind the dune and charged toward them, screaming a ululating war cry that sent shivers up their backs.

Jedra had seen b’rohgs before in the arena. They were four-armed humanoid giants, mutations or throwbacks to an earlier age. Not particularly bright, but vicious fighters. This one was about twice as tall as Jedra, heavily muscled, and fast. It carried a crude stone-tipped spear in its upper right hand, poised for throwing.

“Run!” Kayan screamed. She leaped up, pulling Jedra to his feet, and took off directly away from the b’rohlg. Jedra followed her as soon as he got his balance, but he realized instantly that they would never outrun the creature. At least he wouldn’t. Kayan hadn’t had time to finish; his left foot still flared in agony with each step. They didn’t have time to mindlink and fight the b’rohlg psionically, either. And without weapons, they were as good as dead.

Wait. They did have one weapon. Jedra veered to the left, praying that the b’rohlg would follow him rather than Kayan. Just to make sure, he stumbled, went down to his knees, then got up and ran on. He glanced over his left shoulder; sure enough, the b’rohlg was going for the easy mark. Now Jedra had to time it just right...

The b’rohlg was even faster than he expected. Jedra had to put on a burst of speed to keep the creature aimed in the right direction, and even so it looked like he might not make it. He turned harder to the left, running directly across the b’rohlg’s path. If this didn’t work, the b’rohlg wouldn’t even have to use its spear; it could just grab Jedra in its massive arms when they collided.

The distance between them closed to twenty feet, then ten. Jedra was about to turn and face the b'roh in a last desperate stand when the creature shrieked in pain and whirled around as if something had grabbed it by the leg.

Something had. Jedra had led it right over the sand cactus.

The b'roh tottered on one foot, flailing its arms for balance. Jedra knew it was strong enough to pull free once it regained its footing, and maybe even strong enough to keep chasing him. He couldn't lose his momentary advantage, so he did the one thing he could think of: He concentrated his psionic power and imagined pushing the creature over.

It hadn't done much good when he'd fought Sahalik, but now maybe it would be enough. Jedra shoved with all his might, and the b'roh flailed its arms even more, then finally it shrieked in terror and fell over into the patch of cactus needles.

At least four more penetrated its skin, holding it fast to the ground, and as the giant humanoid screamed and thrashed around it impaled itself again and again until it could barely move.

Then the cactus began sucking it dry.

Kayan came back to stand beside Jedra, and they watched in horrified fascination as the b'roh's burnt-orange skin turned pale and its flesh slowly shrank around its bones.

"It's carnivorous," Kayan whispered incredulously. "That's why your blood wouldn't clot. The cactus drinks blood, so it secretes something to keep it fluid."

The b'roh shuddered once more, then lay still. The spear fell from its grasp and thumped to the sand.

Jedra shuddered, too. He was just as responsible for the creature's horrible death as the cactus was. The fact that it had attacked him didn't make him feel much better about it. He had used his psionic power to kill another intelligent being. Not a very intelligent one, to be sure, but smart enough to use a spear. The b'rohs Jedra had seen in Urik had been able to understand a few spoken commands.

Why had it attacked them? he wondered. Probably for their water, given that the b'rohg didn't have a waterskin of its own. It didn't have much of anything, just a scaly reptile skin of some sort wrapped around its waist, and the spear.

Hmm. The spear.

"We should try to get that," Jedra said. Trying to ignore the desiccated corpse, he crab-walked toward the weapon, sweeping the sand in front of him with his robe as he went to detect any more thorns. When he reached the spear he grasped it by the haft just below the stone point and dragged it back out, careful to step in his same tracks.

The spear was nearly ten feet long, and three inches thick. The haft wasn't solid wood; it was a hollow tube honeycombed with holes. Jedra suspected it was the heartwood of one of the long, skinny kinds of cacti he'd seen farther back where vegetation had been more plentiful. Whatever it was, it was lightweight and strong. The heaviest part of it was the stone point that had been flaked to a sharp edge and bound to the haft with rawhide thongs. The whole thing had a weight and a balance to it that felt right. Though Jedra had no idea how to throw a spear, it felt good in his hand.

"Maybe we should put some distance between us and this place," Kayan said. "Something else might come to investigate the noise."

"Good idea," Jedra said. He wanted to leave anyway. He made a wide detour around the sand cactus and its captive, limping a bit on his not-quite-healed left foot, and led the way toward the west. He winced with each footstep, not just because of the pain, or because of the small but noticeable hole in each sandal, but because he expected to encounter another invisible patch of thorns at any moment.

Despite his fears, they made another mile without mishap, and when they had put a couple of large dunes between them and the hapless b'rohg, they stopped to rest again. Kayan finished healing Jedra's left foot, then they shared another of their honeycakes and washed it down with a drink of water. They had ten cakes left out of the twelve Galar had given them, but they were going through water fast; Jedra figured they only had enough for

another day and a half at this rate. They needed refreshment now, though, to help recoup the strength they had lost to the sand cactus.

“We need to figure out a good way to make sure we don’t step on one of those things again,” Jedra said. He toyed idly with the spear as he spoke, drawing lines in the sand with the point.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Kayan said with a grin. “As long as you walk in front, I don’t mind healing you.”

“Right.” He knew she was joking, but something about her attitude still irked him. Then he remembered some advice an old veteran of the streets had once given him, and he laughed. “You were pretty quick to take the lead when the b’rohg attacked,” he told Kayan.

“Yeah, well, the ground cactus seemed the lesser danger at the moment.”

“Someone I knew once told me, ‘When you go hunting wild inix, you should always take a companion with you. That way you never have to outrun an enraged inix; you only have to outrun your companion.’”

Now it was her turn to miss the joke. “Jedra, I wasn’t trying to leave you to the b’rohg! I was running for my life, and I thought you were right behind me.”

“I was kidding,” he told her.

“Oh.”

She still didn’t laugh, so Jedra dropped it. He toyed with the spear some more, thinking that he could wave it in front of him to detect sand cactus, save that their progress would be excruciatingly slow if they had to sweep every inch of trail ahead of them. He wondered how the elves did it. He hadn’t marched at the head of the column, so he’d never seen what the scouts did for protection. Spotting a pile of bones that hadn’t been disturbed would be a fair indication that you were in cactus territory, but that wouldn’t protect you from a young plant that hadn’t fed yet. Maybe heavier sandals would provide more protection, or there might be a way to spot the needles if you knew what to look for.

He didn't have either the sandals or the knowledge. What he had was a spear, a knapsack, and his robe.

Hmm. His robe was already ripped to shreds; he'd hardly miss another chunk off the bottom of it. If he tied that to the spear...

"What are you doing?" Kayan asked when he ripped off a foot-wide, two-foot-long strip of his robe.

"Watch," he told her. He tugged it through the holes at the butt end of the spear, leaving two loose ends that flopped down on either side, then he tied two of the corners together so the bottom hem ran in a continuous line from side to side. Standing up, he put the spear over his shoulder so the heavy stone point would counterbalance the rest of it, and he took a couple of steps with the rag just scraping the ground in front of him. "There," he said. "A crude but functional sand cactus detector." "Wow," Kayan said. "That just might work." "Of course it'll work," Jedra said, his pride wounded by the thought that she might not think so. He jounced the pole on his shoulder a time or two and said, "Are you rested enough? I want to try it."

Grinning at his boyish enthusiasm, she stood up and put on her pack again. "All right. Lead on."

It took him a few minutes to get the hang of it. At first the end of the spear would dip down and dig into the ground every few steps, or it would lift up too high and the cloth wouldn't drag the surface, but he soon settled into a smoother stride that kept the spear butt aimed down at the right angle. He couldn't take his eyes off the ground for long, though, so Kayan had to navigate from behind, calling out, "A little to the right," or "Watch out for that rock."

Eagerness to test his new invention kept him going for another mile or so, but then fatigue began to set in again and he wondered if he were being silly. Maybe these sand cacti were exceptionally rare, and he was doing the equivalent of keeping a constant watch out for dragons.

Then the cloth snagged on something, and the spear haft jerked backward in his hand. Jedra stopped with his foot still upraised, his pulse suddenly pounding. He slowly backed up a pace.

“Find one?” Kayan asked.

“I think so.” Jedra tugged the cloth free and waved the end of the spear around in a circle, and sure enough, it snagged again a foot or so away. Very carefully, he worked his way around in a half circle, sweeping out a clear path around the perimeter of the needle patch. This one was about eight or ten feet across, and once again there was nothing to indicate it was there except for the needles.

“Good work,” Kayan said.

“Thanks,” he said, pleased with himself.

“We *are* making progress of a sort,” said Kayan. “Now if we can just find that oasis the chief told us about, we might actually survive this little outing.”

* * *

They stopped for the night another mile or so farther west. It was getting truly cold now, and they were both so tired they could barely walk. The elves had not given them sleeping mats, so they simply picked a patch of sand that didn’t have anything growing on it—that was getting easier and easier the farther west they went—and settled down under the bright moon and stars to sleep.

Their knapsacks made lumpy pillows, and their robes were pitifully inadequate as blankets. Now that Jedra and Kayan weren’t exerting themselves, they began shivering almost immediately. Jedra inched closer to Kayan, but he was careful not to touch her, remembering her comment the first night they had slept side by side in the community tent.

After fifteen minutes or so, however, Kayan mindsent, *This is ridiculous. Are we ever going to act like bondmates, or are we going to spend the whole night shivering a foot away from each other?*

Jedra gulped, suddenly warm again. *I—I didn’t want to—I mean, I do want to, but I was afraid you might—*

Afraid I might what, bite? Jedra, I'm cold. You're cold. Snuggle up behind me and put your arm around me.

He moved closer to her, but then couldn't decide where to put his hands. Even wrapped in her robe, she was warm and soft everywhere he touched her. He finally settled for letting her use his left arm for a pillow and holding his right hand against her stomach. She laughed gently and said. *There, that's not so bad, is it?*

That's—that's wonderful, he said. *Warmer, too.* He tried to slow his breathing again and fall asleep, but he was too conscious of Kayan in his arms.

After a couple more minutes, Kayan said, *You're tight as a bowstring. Relax.*

I'd like to, he said, *but I've never done this before.*

Just what is it you think we're doing?

Sleeping, Jedra said quickly. *I've never slept with a woman in my arms before.*

She turned her head back so she could look at him out of her right eye. *You're kidding. Never?*

Embarrassed, and a little put out at her incredulous tone, Jedra said, *I remember sharing a cot with my mother when I was very young, but she died when I was six.*

Oh, said Kayan. She looked away again. A moment later she said, *Then I guess it goes without saying that you've never...*

No.

Oh, she said again. *Well, it's a little cold for that tonight, and it's already been a busy day. Much as I'd like to show you what you've been missing, I think we'd be better off getting our sleep tonight.*

That's what I thought we were trying to do, Jedra said.

Kayan giggled softly. *So we were.* She turned her head back toward him again, farther than the first time, and before Jedra quite realized what was happening she had kissed him.

Her lips were soft and warm against his, warmer even than her skin beneath his hands. The kiss was over almost before he could respond, but the memory of it lingered even after she turned back around and settled her head down on his arm again.

Good night, she sent.

Yes, it is, he replied automatically.

* * *

The moon was halfway across the sky when Jedra woke. He belatedly realized that one of them should have stayed up to keep watch, but with that thought came the equally strong realization that neither of them could have managed it if they'd wanted to. He had fallen asleep with Kayan in his arms; if he could do that, then nothing could have kept him awake.

He supposed he should at least scout around now. If he was careful, he wouldn't even have to disturb Kayan to do it. He focused his awareness inward, reaching for the center of his psionic power, the one that allowed him to tell if someone was watching him. When he suddenly felt a heightened sense of awareness, a tingling at the back of his neck, he knew he had it, so he imagined himself rising upward, looking down upon himself and Kayan. They were swirls of light against the starlit sand, softly glowing like the green luminescence of the nocturnal moths that sometimes flitted about the eaves of buildings in the city at night. Jedra rose up until he could see a couple of miles in every direction, but no other lights broke the darkness. If anything was out there, it wasn't interested in them.

But as long as he was looking...

Careful to remember the way back this time, he moved farther west, searching for the oasis. There would almost certainly be something alive there, something he could sense, and that way he could learn how much farther they had to walk.

It should have worked. Jedra went for miles, until his power began to stretch thin and the psionic vision grew dim, but he found no oasis, nor

even the long, rocky ridge that the elf chief had said it was near. Only more desert. He searched north and south a few miles in either direction, but still encountered nothing.

Maybe he was doing it wrong. He hadn't found Sahalik by searching psionically, either. Jedra brought his point of view back to the two swirls of light on the sand and let it sink back into his body. When he opened his eyes he saw the stars overhead, their constellations advanced well into morning, and when he shifted his arms he felt Kayan stir slightly within his embrace. He hated to wake her, but they should get up and walk again before it got too hot. The trouble was, where should they go?

* * *

Kayan couldn't find the oasis either, but that wasn't so surprising, since sensing things at a distance wasn't one of her strong points.

"I think we should link up again and try it together," Jedra said after she had tried it on her own. They were sitting on the sand with their knapsacks open before them, sharing another honeycake for breakfast. "We need to know where we're headed, or we'll get lost out here."

"If we can't find the oasis, we're already lost," Kayan pointed out. "But you're right. It just seems like every time we rest up, the first thing we do is tire ourselves out again."

"We can make it fast," Jedra said. "Together, we should be able to find it in no time."

"We hope." Kayan shrugged, then held out her hand. "All right, let's try it."

They had not needed to touch in order to join their minds before, but Jedra took her hand in his anyway. "Ready?" he asked.

"Let's do it."

They merged. Once again all their worldly cares dropped away in the birth of a single being. Their simple kiss a few hours ago seemed insignificant compared to the communion they now shared. All the same,

now that they were one, each realized what that kiss had meant to the other at the time, and that realization—plus the physical contact they made now—enhanced their bond well beyond their previous experience. Where before they had vibrated with power, now they sang.

To the oasis! they cried, arrowing westward in the form of a huge roc, an eaglelike bird of prey with a wingspan of nearly a hundred feet. This was the most detailed and realistic of their psionic visions yet; the desert below them undulated with regular waves of dunes, like ripples in a water cask, and the stars overhead were crisp points of light. The few animals inhabiting the sandy wastes glowed softly with auras of green or blue light, but their shapes were readily discernible even from Jedra and Kayan's great height. There were a few wild kanks, possibly escapees from elf tribes, an insect colony of some sort in a cluster of five-foot domes, and a few other animals that they didn't recognize. They remembered the locations of every creature they saw so they could steer clear of them just in case they proved hostile.

The oasis, however, wasn't obvious. After a few minutes of flying—many miles under the roc's immense wings—they realized it simply wasn't there.

They hadn't drifted that far off course during their hikes the previous day. There could be only one explanation, and they voiced it instantly: *The elf chief lied*. He had waited until Galar was out of earshot to give them directions to the oasis, and then he had sent them off to their deaths.

The roc screeched in anger. *We should go back and teach him a lesson*, they decided, and the great bird whirled around to fly east, but they immediately thought, *No, we can't waste our strength on simple revenge. We need to find a safe haven, and soon*.

They swept over the desert in great circles, searching for an oasis, an outpost, a caravan—any sign of water or intelligent life that might be carrying water—but the elf chief had sent them directly into the most barren wastes in the region. They knew what lay to the east; they had just walked it, but the terrain to the north and south looked just the same. Only to the

west did it change, but that change was hardly for the better. There they found only stony barrens and rocky badlands.

Beyond that, however...

The city of Tyr rested in a circular basin at the base of the Ringing Mountains. As dangerous as it was there, with King Kalak enslaving everyone who even looked at him wrong and forcing them to build an enormous pyramid in the center of the city, it was still better than dying in the desert. Trouble was, traveling on foot it was over a week's walk away. They could never reach it on the provisions they carried with them.

Jedra and Kayan circled the enormous walled city, crying out in frustration with their psionic roc's powerful call. They could *be* there now if they knew how to transport their bodies along with their minds. But they didn't know. They hardly knew what they were doing as it was.

For the want of a mentor, we shall perish within sight of salvation, they thought.

The city glowed with the light of thousands of minds at work, one of which could undoubtedly teach them what they needed to know. But how could they find that one mind among so many? Some were brighter than others, but Jedra had learned the hard way that the signature of a powerful mind didn't necessarily mean a friendly psionist waited behind it. In Tyr, with its immense slave pens and massive military buildup to keep the peace, most of the psionists would be slavemasters or warriors.

Arrgh! they cried in frustration. *So close! All we need is a little help.*

Their agitation weakened the contact. The roc began to diminish, and though their controlling minds remained linked, they separated into two distinct points of view.

The Kayan part of their mind said, *It's not going to happen. We're wasting our strength; we've been linked too long as it is. At this rate we'll exhaust ourselves before we can even take our first steps toward anywhere.*

What difference will that make if we have nowhere to go? Jedra asked.

We can't give up. Kayan said. *We still have a day's supplies. Two if we're careful. Tyr is the closest sign of life; we'll head there and hope to*

find some form of help along the way. There isn't any—

Save it. Before Jedra could protest further, Kayan broke the link.

If coming down from their convergence was hard before, being dropped out of it unexpectedly was like feeling his own death. Jedra lurched drunkenly and had to put out his arms to keep from falling over.

“Yuh...” he tried to speak, but words wouldn't form. *You might have warned me!* he mindsent instead.

It was the wrong thing to say, and saying it mentally was the wrong medium. They were both suffering from the post-link depression, and filtered through his frustration and hers, his mental words carried far more freight than spoken words ever could.

If you weren't so indecisive, I wouldn't have had to break away so abruptly, she snapped back at him.

Her meaning came across instantly, along with her contempt. He looked up to see her glaring at him. *Indecisive?* he sent back. *I don't call walking seven days to Tyr on two days' rations a decision. I call that stupidity.*

Oh, so what would you rather do? Wait here? Go back to the elves and say we're sorry, will they take us back in?

That's a better idea than just walking on into the desert. If you hadn't got us in trouble there in the first place, we—

Me? You're the one who got us in trouble. You and your stupid cloud ray.

Jedra climbed shakily to his feet. *I was looking for Sahalik, which I would never have had to do if you hadn't chased him out of camp.*

Kayan stood up, too, and though she only came up to the middle of his chest, she looked ready to take him on with bare hands at any moment. *Oh, yeah? And what was I supposed to do, let him have his filthy way with me just so we could stay with your precious elves? Was I supposed to buy their hospitality with my body?*

Jedra clenched and unclenched his fists. *You could have let him down easy,* he said. *You didn't have to humiliate him in front of the whole tribe.*

I did, too. Kayan turned away and picked up her pack. Of course if you had been more decisive when he first showed up, maybe I wouldn't have, but when he realized you were a pushover, he—

Oh, so that's my fault now, too! Jedra grabbed his own pack off the sand and tied it closed, then swung it onto his back. He picked up the spear with its rag tied to the end and slung that over his shoulder, wincing at the sore spot where it had rested during the last march. Well let me tell you something, miss high-and-mighty ex-templar, I didn't get us into this mess. You did. You and your—

Cloud ray, she said. Cloud ray, cloud ray, cloud ray. That's why we got kicked out of the tribe. I had us living in the chief's tent until you pulled that stunt.

Arrgghh! Jedra growled, an inarticulate bellow of rage. She'd twisted things around in a circle again. He stomped off with the rag end of the spear bent low in front of him, sweeping for sand cactus.

Where are you going? Kayan demanded.

Jedra stopped. He'd struck out to the north, he realized. Toward Urik, the only place he'd ever called home. But Urik was nearly twice as far away as anyplace else they could go, the entire distance through open desert. He looked toward the east, where the sky was just beginning to show the first glow of approaching dawn. Only hostile elves and the tablelands lay in that direction. The south was no better. Reluctantly, he turned westward and began walking. I guess I'm going to Tyr, he said.

* * *

One good thing about anger, Jedra thought an hour or so later—it completely overrode the exhaustion he'd expected to feel after their convergence. He and Kayan had already walked farther this morning than they'd gone in either of their previous marches, and the sun hadn't even cleared the horizon yet. The last stars were fading before them, though, and it wouldn't be long before the temperature began to rise.

Who would have thought there could be so much change in so barren a landscape? Hot enough to cook meat on a rock during the day, and cold enough to freeze it at night; full of vegetation and lizards and other small animals just a day to the east, but practically empty here. A person couldn't count on anything in the desert.

Not even his companion. Jedra couldn't believe how Kayan had turned on him. She'd kissed him less than half a day ago! She'd been all warmth and friendliness, and then she'd turned right around and accused him of causing all their troubles. What kind of a bondmate was that? Well, once they made it out of the desert, that was the last he would see of her. He didn't care about their psionic powers, or about finding a master to teach them more. He didn't want to share anything more with her anyway, not if she felt that way about him. Indecisive! Pushover! Hah. He'd fought an elf warrior for her, and killed a b'rohlg. And even now, who was leading the way, braving the dangers of sand cactus and who-knew-what-else while she plodded along behind, safe from harm?

He increased his pace, eager to get out of the desert.

Hey, Kayan mindsent. You're already going too fast. Your legs are longer than mine.

I thought you wanted to get to Tyr, he replied without turning his head, but he slowed down.

* * *

The sun had been up for a couple of hours before they spoke again. *Your shoulders are going to get sunburned,* Kayan sent.

I know, Jedra responded. His pack covered some of the rips the cactus had made in his robe, but not all of them. *Shouldn't you turn your robe around or something?* They were walking on much rockier ground now, the sand underfoot littered with pebbles and stones. Occasional reddish-yellow boulders dotted the landscape as well. Jedra paused beside one such boulder, letting his danger sense tell him if anything was hiding behind it,

and when he was sure it was safe he relaxed a bit and said, *I suppose I should.*

He took off his pack and dropped it to the ground, handed Kayan the spear, then pulled his arms through his sleeves and twisted the robe around. When he stuck his arms out again the cloth felt tight across his neck, but most of the holes the cactus had ripped in it were in front. He put his pack on and took back the spear, then started walking again.

Jedra, Kayan sent.

What?

Couldn't we at least rest for a minute?

Rest. That sounded good. Trouble was, in his depression, would he ever start out again?

He would have to find out sometime. *All right,* he said, turning around and walking back to the boulder where Kayan still waited.

They sat down in the shade and each took a drink from Kayan's waterskin. Her honeycakes beckoned from within her pack, but neither she nor Jedra took one. They would eat during the hottest part of the day, when they stopped for shelter from the sun.

After a minute or so of awkward silence, Kayan said aloud, "Jedra, I'm sorry I said all those things. I was just frustrated and tired. I don't really think that about you." "You can't lie in a mindlink," Jedra said.

You can too, Kayan sent. She laughed, and when Jedra looked puzzled she said, "Think about it."

He tried to work out the logic of it, and finally he admitted, "All right, maybe you can. But you still said it. You wanted it to be true." "I didn't either. I wanted to hurt you." He looked at her as if she'd just said she planned to stab him in the back. "That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"Of course it is," she said. She shook her head to flip her hair back out of her eyes. "Look, we were mad at each other. When you're mad, you say things to hurt each other. You don't necessarily mean them."

"Oh," Jedra said. He looked at her again, really looked at her for the first time that day. She certainly seemed sincere, with her green eyes open

wide and her round face full of concern. Jedra felt himself relax a little. "I supposed that's another thing I don't know much about," he said.

"What, fighting?"

"Yeah." He looked away again, out over the desert. "The whole world seems to thrive on it, but I've never understood why. What good does it do? People hurt each other all the time, usually for the stupidest reasons. They kill each other because of an insult, or sometimes just for something to do. Some people are always looking for fights."

"Like Sahalik," Kayan said.

"Yeah, like Sahalik." Jedra looked back at her. "I don't know. Maybe you didn't have anything to do with that. I'm a half-elf; he probably would have found an excuse to challenge me even if you'd been nicer to him."

"Maybe." Kayan shrugged. "I guess I could have tried anyway."

Jedra wondered how they'd suddenly wound up on the opposite sides of the conversation, but decided not to dig too deeply into it. It might be better to leave things as they stood. "Whatever, the point is I hate fighting. It never solves anything. It just hurts everyone involved."

"You're a pacifist," said Kayan, true wonder in her voice. "That's incredible."

"Why?"

"Because of where you come from. Most people who grow up on the streets just take it as given that they have to fight for survival. For someone like you to figure out that there might be a better way, well, that's pretty unusual."

Jedra wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not, but he decided to take it as one. "Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome," she said. She blushed, then leaned closer to him. "I'm sorry I got you mad. Kiss and make up?"

He wasn't sure if he had gotten completely over his anger yet, but he suddenly realized he was going to have to practice what he'd just preached. He supposed it could have been worse, though.

“All right,” he said, and he leaned forward for the second kiss of his life.

* * *

Their rest stop lasted a little longer than they’d originally intended, but when they started out again they walked side by side. The ground was too rocky for sand cactus, and besides, it was easier to hold hands that way.

They walked at a steady pace all through the morning, their improved spirits helping even more than anger to keep them going. The harder ground underfoot helped as well. It was difficult to judge how far they’d gone, since they hadn’t paid that much attention to the passing miles, so when they stopped for lunch Jedra said, “Why don’t we link up and check our progress?”

“You just want to mind-merge again,” Kayan said playfully.

“And you don’t?”

“Of course I do, but I don’t know if it’s a good idea. Look what happened last time.”

“Hmm.”

They had stopped by the biggest boulder they could find, but it wasn’t rounded enough to provide much shade with the sun straight overhead. Jedra considered the situation for a moment, then he propped the spear against the rock, took off his robe, and rucked the corners into the holes in the spear haft. Then he stretched the cloth out toward the ground and weighted the bottom corners down with rocks, making a lean-to tent big enough for both of them to fit under.

“All right,” Kayan said when he’d finished. “Let’s link up and see how far we’ve come, but that’s it. No lingering this time.”

“Deal.”

They climbed under the makeshift tent, joined hands, and linked. At once their argument that morning seemed petty and foolish. Compared to

the sense of well-being they felt now, their little differences of opinion were insignificant. Who cared who got them into trouble? They were invincible now. Once again they rose on powerful roc wings over the desert, and they immediately wheeled around to the west and flew for Tyr.

It was still a long way off. Even at the pace they'd maintained that morning it would take five days to reach it, but they wouldn't be able to keep up that pace after they ran out of food and water. They had maybe three days of good marching left, maximum, and the last one would be without food or water.

There's got to be a better solution than just heading west until we drop, Jedra's part of their mind suggested.

We've been over this before, Kayan's practical side replied. *We knew it was a long way when we decided to go for it. We've done better than we thought we'd do; let's be glad of it and keep going.*

Let's at least look for the oasis on our way back, Jedra thought. *We might find it yet, or something else that'll help.*

All right. They turned away from the city and flew eastward again, focusing their psionic senses on anything unusual. Water, food, intelligent minds, even animals that might provide a life-sustaining meal. At first they found nothing, but when they had come about two-thirds of the way back to where their bodies waited they spotted something far to the north. A scintillating beacon of some sort, like sunlight reflected off a rippling surface.

Open water? It couldn't be, not out here. But it might be something else useful, so they veered northward and with a few powerful wingbeats flew toward it.

A city slid up from behind the horizon, its buildings taller and straighter-sided than anything either of them had ever seen. Even the modest ones were larger than the pyramid under construction at Tyr, and there were dozens even bigger. What they had seen was sunlight reflecting off the flat sides of the buildings.

There can't be a city here, they thought, but there it stood. The trouble was, in the psionic vision what they saw wasn't necessarily reality.

What could it be? Jedra asked, and Kayan answered, *An ancient ruin? I've heard the desert is littered with them.*

This doesn't look very ruined.

Maybe we're seeing it as it used to be.

They circled around, looking at the buildings from all sides. At their bases grew trees and green grass so thick the dirt couldn't be seen between the blades. In the middle of one open courtyard a fountain sprayed three jets of water high into the air.

And seated on a bench beside the fountain, a six-limbed, mantislike thri-kreen leaned its head back and watched them with its black, multifaceted eyes.

We've found it! Jedra said. *This has to be the oasis.*

It doesn't have to be anything, Kayan said.

Sure it does. And whatever it is, it's better than nothing. We should come here instead.

No, we should stick with our original course. If we start chasing mirages, we'll never make it anywhere.

This isn't a mirage.

They felt the same rending of their union that they had felt last time they had begun to argue, the same diminishing of their synergy. Kayan said, *Let's unlink and talk about it.*

Jedra sensed that she was going to break the link anyway, so he readied himself for the shock and said, *All right.*

It wasn't quite so bad as before. Their roc body and the city below flickered and vanished like a burst soap bubble, and Jedra once again found himself sitting on the hard rock with Kayan by his side. Their makeshift tent flapped softly overhead in a faint breeze.

Neither of them spoke for a minute while they tried to corral their stressed emotions. The letdown was just as intense as always, but they were

getting familiar with it, and they simply waited for it to pass.

Jedra spoke first. "I still think we should go for the city. It's only another day and a half away."

"It may not be a city," Kayan said. "And if it is, I bet it's nothing but rubble now, no matter what we saw." "And the thri-kreen?"

"Who knows? Maybe it was the ghost of the king." Jedra leaned back against the rock. They had pitched their lean-to tent on the west side of it, which hadn't received sun yet today and was still a few degrees cooler than the surrounding air. "Maybe it wasn't," he said. "Maybe it was an actual, living thri-kreen. Maybe it lives out there, and the city was its mental image of home."

Kayan picked up a fist-sized rock and turned it over in her hand. "You *want* to go into a thri-kreen's home? They eat elves, did you know that?"

"I'm not an elf," Jedra told her. "I'm a half-elf."

"So it'll only eat half of you."

"We can defend ourselves if necessary," Jedra said, "but I'll bet we won't have to. Thri-kreen and elves get along fine in the city. I'll bet it'll sell us food and water if we offer to buy it. I've still got Dornal's money bag. And maybe the thri-kreen will know a better way across the desert than the way we're going."

"'Maybe' is a pretty unsure thing to hang your hopes on," Kayan said to the rock.

"So is thinking we can walk all the way to Tyr on two half-empty waterskins and ten honeycakes."

Kayan took a deep breath and let it out slowly, but didn't speak.

"This is serious," Jedra said. "We could die out here. We *will* die if we make the wrong decision."

"I *know* that." Kayan flung the rock she'd been holding out into the desert, where it clacked against another rock and bounced to the side. "That's why I don't want to waste our last resources wandering off after a psionic chimera."

Since they weren't speaking mind-to-mind Jedra didn't get a definition of "chimera," but he had an idea of what she meant anyway.

"Let's sleep on it," he said. "When we're ready to travel we can see if it's still there. If it's not, I'm willing to try for Tyr, but if it is I think we should go for the city."

"I don't know," Kayan said. "But you're right about one thing: We should sleep." She lay back against her pack and closed her eyes.

* * *

Jedra kept watch again, then traded with Kayan for a few hours' rest of his own. When he woke in the late afternoon they shared another honeycake and each had another mouthful of water. Then they joined minds again and looked for the mysterious city.

It was still there, but this time the *thri-kreen* was roasting an entire *erdlu* on a spit over a campfire beside the fountain. The smell of the giant, cooked bird rose into the air, haunting Kayan and Jedra even after they had broken the link and returned to their rock in the desert.

"That settles it," Jedra said. "We're going."

Kayan narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "I still don't like it. What's that city doing there, anyway? I've never heard of it before. And what's a *thri-kreen* doing roasting an *erdlu* in the middle of it? Where'd the *erdlu* come from? For that matter, where'd the *thri-kreen* come from? And where's everybody else? Something's not right here."

Jedra dismantled their tent and put on his robe again. "I don't care," he said. "It's better than trying for Tyr." He slung his pack over his shoulders and picked up the spear. "You coming?"

She blinked in surprise. "Jedra, what's gotten into you?"

He shrugged. "I guess I'm just trying to be decisive."

"What? You're rushing off into the unknown because I called you indecisive yesterday?"

“No.” He tried to explain, but it was hard to put words around his reasons. “This just feels right. I know this is where we should go.”

“It feels right. Oh, great.” All the same, she apparently realized he was done arguing about it. She stood up and slowly drew on her pack. “If you’re wrong...” She let the rest of the sentence hang.

Jedra finished it for her. “If I’m wrong, we’re dead. But I’m not wrong; I can feel it. This is the right thing to do.”

“I certainly hope so. All right, then, let’s go.”

* * *

The next day and a half passed much like the first, save that the terrain grew steadily rockier the farther they went. Once they had committed themselves to reaching the mystery city to the northeast there was no more argument about it, but Kayan obviously still doubted and resented the decision. There were no more goodnight Kisses; indeed, the rocks held the sun’s heat well into the flight so they split the watch again and didn’t even sleep together.

Jedra’s danger sense never even twinged the whole time, either while they were walking or while they rested. This rocky wasteland was truly empty.

On the evening of the next day—their third since leaving the elves—they crested a shallow rise to find their goal laid out before them. It was indeed a city, and a vast one, too, but unfortunately Kayan’s guess had been right: It was now a complete ruin. Stone buildings had collapsed into piles of rubble, and time had flattened the piles until the city was little more than a regular array of rocky hills. A few of the hardier structures—mostly toward the center of town—had fared better, some standing a few stories high, but most of the outlying buildings were mere fragments of their former selves.

Kayan refrained from saying “I told you so.” Jedra was glad of that; ridicule on top of the intense letdown he felt would have probably driven

him over the edge. Their waterskins held only a swallow of water for each of them; if they didn't find more soon, they would die.

"What about the thri-kreen?" Kayan asked. "Maybe he's real, at least."

Jedra cast about with his watcher sense, and sure enough he felt a faint tingling of a presence toward the center of the city. "Something's alive in there," he said.

"Can't you tell if it's the thri-kreen?"

He shook his head. "Just something alive."

"It could just as easily be something dangerous as something we want to meet," Kayan pointed out.

"It doesn't feel dangerous," Jedra said, concentrating. He felt a sense of urgency more than anything. "In fact, it feels like it's in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know. I don't sense any threat to us, though."

Kayan looked at the piles of rubble they would have to navigate to reach whatever Jedra sensed, then with a sigh she said, "That's probably the only thing here in this slag heap; we might as well go see what it is."

* * *

It took them another hour of scrambling over boulders just to reach the city's center. They stayed to the middle of what had once been streets, finding that the debris wasn't as thick there, but the closer they got to the large buildings the deeper the rubble became simply because there had been more of it stacked up to begin with.

When they finally made their way into the city's core, they found that the remains of the largest buildings were arranged the same way they had seen them in their psionic vision. The few standing walls still looked straight and smooth, and some of them had doorways and windows leading into dark interiors. The life that Jedra sensed, however, came from an intersection of streets between two of the biggest surviving structures.

It was hardly a street at all, now. The top half of what must have been a ten-story rectangular tower had fallen into it, scattering its massive stone blocks the way the wind scatters sand. Jedra picked his way among them, some of them nearly as tall as he was, searching for the source of the life he sensed. Now that they were close it seemed to be weaker.

At last he thought to climb up on top of a particularly large stone and look around from there, and from that vantage he finally spotted a dusky yellow, chitinous leg sticking out from behind another block. “Over there,” he said, pointing with the spear. He jumped down, and he and Kayan advanced cautiously. He didn’t *think* they needed to fear this thri-kreen, but it never hurt to be ready for trouble.

When they rounded the edge of the stone and saw the entire creature, they knew they had no reason to worry. Not about it attacking them, at any rate. The mantis warrior lay on its side, its six limbs sprawled out and its head resting flat on the ground. The only sign of life was a faint pulsing in its bulbous abdomen.

There were no obvious wounds. “What’s wrong with it?” Jedra asked Kayan.

She leaned down and gingerly touched one of its clawed hands, then closed her eyes. “Dehydration,” she said after a moment. “Wonderful. Thri-kreen can live for weeks without food or water. If this one is dying of thirst, there can’t be any water around for a hundred miles.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Jedra looked down at the insectile beast. It was the biggest thri-kreen he'd ever seen, easily ten feet long from the end of its abdomen to the top of its head, with its upper four appendages adapted for grasping and its lower legs long and double-jointed for running or leaping. Its neck was nearly two feet long. Only its head seemed small, and that only in comparison to the rest of its body. It was oblong, with jet-black compound eyes sticking out bulbously on either side and powerful mandibles in front.

Something about its shape didn't seem quite right, though. Jedra hadn't paid much attention to thri-kreen when he'd lived in the city—it was best just to give them plenty of room—but this one seemed subtly different. A bigger cranial bulge behind the eyes, maybe, and a narrower face, if that glistening expanse of hard exoskeleton could be called a face.

Strapped to the creature's back was a pack proportioned to the thri-kreen's large size. Jedra could have fit inside the bag, and there would have been room for Kayan on the wooden frame that extended below it. They would have had to empty it first, though; the pack bulged with unknown contents, and the frame was festooned with hardware. Cooking pots, the two multi-bladed heads of a gythka—without the usual long pole between them—some kind of curved throwing weapon with spikes sticking out of it, and more things that Jedra didn't recognize had all been tied to it. Jedra doubted if he could even lift the pack, much less carry it anywhere. Thri-kreen must be *strong*.

And rich. Most of the stuff was made of metal.

The creature became aware of their presence. It shuddered, trying to lift the arm that Kayan still touched, but it couldn't. The mandibles opened, clicked shut, then they opened again and a faint, croaking voice said, "Water."

"Sorry," Kayan said, backing away. "We don't even have enough for ourselves."

“Water,” the creature croaked again. It tried again to move, this time managing to raise its head a few inches. Its multifaceted eyes seemed to fix on Kayan, then on Jedra. “I know... where is... water,” it said. “You give me... yours... then I get more... for all of us.”

Jedra was still in shock over the complete wreckage of his expectations. He had come here expecting to find help, but now he found himself being asked for it instead. His beautiful city, with open fountains and food enough for weeks, had turned out to be the delirious ravings of a dying thri-kreen. He had doomed himself and Kayan to the same fate.

Unless the thri-kreen was telling the truth. Could it know where to find water in this ancient city? “Tell us where it is,” Jedra said, “and we’ll go get it.”

The thri-kreen laid its head back on the ground. “Never reach it,” it said. “Water is... underground. Must work... mechanism.”

“I can use a pump,” Jedra said.

The thri-kreen shuddered the whole length of its body. “Not this one,” it said. “Must know... principle. Suction head... not enough... need more differential... priming valve... air squeezer...” The words trailed off and it lay still.

Jedra looked at Kayan. “What do you think? Does any of that make sense to you?”

She shook her head. “It’s delirious.”

“No.” The thri-kreen lifted its head again, and even managed to prop itself up with an arm. “I am... rational. I can reach... more water... if you help me.” Kayan stepped back out of the creature’s hearing, pulling Jedra along by his sleeve. “It’s desperate,” she whispered to him. “It’ll say anything to get our water.”

Jedra looked back at the enormous mantis, its black eyes reflecting no readable emotion as it watched them decide its fate. “Yes,” he whispered to Kayan, “but that doesn’t mean he’s lying, does it?”

“What, you believe it knows where there’s a well? Why didn’t it use it before?”

Jedra noticed she was saying “it” rather than “he” in reference to the thri-kreen. Was she trying to keep from thinking of it—of him—as a fellow intelligent being? Jedra couldn’t do that. He didn’t want to do that. He said, “Maybe he collapsed before he could get there.”

“Hah. It seems pretty unlikely that it’d get this close and then give up. I think it’s lying.”

The setting sun cast long shadows among the broken stones littering the courtyard. Jedra wondered how they would find their way back out of this maze with only one moon and the stars to guide them. And where would they go if they did?

“So you want to just leave him to die?” he asked.

She sighed. “What else can we do? *I wasn’t lying; we don’t have enough water for ourselves.*”

Jedra nodded. “Then why are we whispering? To spare his feelings?”

Kayan clenched her fists. “I—” *I don’t care about—You’re a healer. You could no more watch him die than you could kill him yourself with this spear.* Jedra hefted the b’roh’g’s weapon for emphasis. *You’re trying to talk yourself into it, but it’s not working.*

Don’t go putting words in my mouth, Kayan said. *I could let it die in an instant if I had, to. I’m just trying to decide if I have to.*

Jedra pulled off his pack and took his waterskin from it. There was only a swallow left, hardly enough to gurgle when he shook the skin. Kayan’s waterskin held no more than his, he knew. *I don’t think it’s really going to make much difference,* he said. *You said it yourself; we don’t have enough water to do us any good anyway. But a thri-kreen doesn’t need much water to survive. What toe have left could revive him, and he could help us find more. He talks like he knows this place; who knows, maybe there really is a well.*

Maybe. And maybe it just wants us to revive it so it can use us for food. They eat elves, remember? I’ll bet it wouldn’t turn down half-elf, or even human in its present state.

I don't sense any danger from him, Jedra said. Not even when I try to imagine him healthy again. He tried to think about it logically, though. Thri-kreen were carnivores, true enough. *Is there any way to tell psionically if he's telling the truth?* he asked.

She nodded. *Yes, if you know how to do it. Unfortunately, that's not one of my skills.*

Oh.

Just one more reason why we need a master to train us. With our combined power we should be able to find out what he had for breakfast three years ago, but we don't know how.

Jedra sloshed his waterskin. *Then we'll have to do it without psionics.*

Kayan stared past his shoulder at the insectile creature. It stirred feebly, then quieted again. Finally she shook her head. *I don't know how I let you talk me into these things, but all right, let's try it. We certainly don't have much to lose.*

When the thri-kreen saw them returning with their waterskins, it croaked, "Your generosity... will be returned... a thousandfold."

"I'll settle for full packs and a guide out of the desert," Jedra said as he held the waterskin up to the thing's mandibles. It took him a moment to figure out how to pour the water without spilling any, but there was no hurry. He dribbled a few drops at a time into the creature's hard mouth and let them run down the back of its throat.

When his waterskin was empty he took Kayan's and poured its contents into the thri-kreen's thirsty mouth as well, then handed the empty skin back to her. She held it up to catch the last drops on her tongue, then put it away in her pack.

They didn't have to wait long for the water to take effect. The thri-kreen lay back for a couple of minutes while the pulsations in its abdomen grew stronger, then slowly, deliberately, it put its four hands down on the ground and pushed itself erect. Its backpack teetered precariously, but the creature used its upper two arms to steady the load while it came to its feet.

It towered over them now, its powerful forearms cocked forward in front of it, ready to grab, and its mantis head lowered to study its benefactors. Or were they now prey? Suddenly Jedra wasn't so sure reviving a starving thri-kreen was such a good idea.

He held the spear ready. Not quite pointed toward it—he didn't want the creature to think he was challenging it—but he made sure he could bring the stone point to bear quickly if he had to.

Get ready to link, he sent to Kayan, then aloud he said, "You should know that we can stop you psionically as easily as we revived you, if that becomes necessary."

The thri-kreen opened and closed its mandibles with a clicking sound. "Commendable," it said. Its voice was much richer now, deeper and with more volume. "One should always be prepared. However, I am not thri-kreen, as you have mistakenly assumed. I am *tohr*-kreen. Related, but more... civilized. We do not harm other intelligent creatures."

I've heard of them, Kayan mindsent. *They're like priests or something. Loners. They don't come into cities much, and they're not nearly as aggressive as regular thri-kreen.*

"Good," Jedra said aloud. He lowered the spear a few inches. "Do you have a name?"

"Kitarak," the tohr-kreen said. The name was more clicks than anything, but it fit a human tongue well enough.

"I'm Jedra," Jedra said, "and this is Kayan."

"Charmed," Kitarak said. "Or not, as the case may be. You are psionicians, rather than mages."

Jedra wasn't sure if that was supposed to be a joke. "Uh, right," he said. "So if you're civilized, you'll stick to your bargain. We gave you the last of our water; it's time you showed us this well of yours."

The tohr-kreen clacked his mandibles again. "Ah yes, the well," he said. "A deep subject. Come." He turned to the right and began walking through the rubble with a quick, darting stride.

For someone who had only minutes before been dying of dehydration, Kitarak could move fast. It was all Jedra and Kayan could do to keep up. Occasionally they lost sight of him behind a large boulder or the remnant of a building, but fortunately his enormous pack squeaked with every step he took, so they could home in on the noise even when they couldn't see him. At last the noise stopped, however, and they came cautiously around a corner to see him lowering his pack to the ground and bending over a pile of stones at the base of a relatively well-preserved building. It still had two walls, at any rate, and part of a third.

The other buildings around them were in even better shape. They were much larger, too; some of them rose five or six stories. Jedra looked around at their placement, and realized they were standing in the same spot where the courtyard fountain had been in their psionic vision.

The tohr-kreen began removing the piled-up stones. With his four arms, that didn't take long; by the time Jedra and Kayan had arrived and removed their own packs, he had exposed a piece of machinery of some sort, Jedra recognized a pump handle and spout, but that was about the only thing he recognized. Three more levers stuck out of a flat plate on the ground, and a set of toothed gears connected a two-handed crank to a vertical shaft that also went into the ground beside the levers.

Finding machinery amid such ruins was surprise enough, but Jedra was even more astonished when he realized that everything but the pump handle was made of metal. If he could carry even one of those levers or gears back to Urik, he could name his price from any weaponsmith in town.

"How did this manage to survive the scavengers?" he asked.

Kitarak twisted his long neck so first one eye, then the other, looked toward Jedra. With their multiple facets, it was impossible to tell just what he was looking at. "It is worth more as a pump," he said. "Those of us who know how to use it are careful to hide it from those who don't." He worked the pump handle up and down a few times, bringing forth a squeak of rusty metal but no water, then he pulled one of the levers beside it toward himself and bent over to spin the crank with his lower set of arms. The gears

squeaked, too, but the shaft turned, and deep underground something vibrated.

“The water is too deep to pump directly,” Kitarak said while he worked the crank. “Atmospheric pressure will only raise water thirty-five feet at this elevation. So we must pressurize the containment vessel to provide more lift.”

“Right,” Jedra said. He hadn’t understood a word of what Kitarak had said. He looked over to Kayan, but she merely shrugged her shoulders as well.

Kitarak went on without pause. “Unfortunately the cistern leaks after all these many centuries, so I must pump fast to keep it pressurized. In another century or two, I fear someone will have to descend into the tank itself to replace the seals.”

“In another *century*?” Jedra asked incredulously. “You seriously think this thing will last that long?”

“Why not?” Kitarak replied. “It has lasted until now. I and other travelers have had to repair the handles, and once a valve stuck on the lifting piston, but other than that—”

“What’s all this valves and pistons stuff, anyway?” Jedra asked. “I’m completely lost here.”

Kitarak bent down farther and switched from his lower arms to his upper ones on the crank. “It is tinkercraft,” he said. “An ancient discipline, lost to time for all but we few scholars who struggle to keep it alive.”

Kayan had been watching silently the whole time. Now she spoke up. “I’ve heard of it. It’s the opposite of magic. Or of psionics for that matter. Using mechanisms to replace sentient beings. Some say it helped bring on the destruction of Athas.”

Kitarak stopped cranking for a second. The below-ground vibration stopped as well, and now they could hear a faint hissing from around the base of the levers. Then Kitarak resumed cranking. “Not so,” he said. “Not so to all your points, except possibly the first. Magic is a lazy attempt to duplicate tinkercraft without the hardware. What magicians don’t

understand is that every action has an opposite and equal reaction. Every act of creation is an act of destruction. Each spell they employ uses life-force, which is then gone forever. It is *magic* that destroyed Athas. Not tinkercraft.”

Kayan looked like she might have argued the point, but just then the pipe began to gurgle. “Ah, we have built up enough head!” Kitarak said happily. “Now we can help it along a bit.” Switching to his lower arms on the crank again, he used his upper ones to work the conventional pump handle. “Get your waterskins ready,” he said. “When it comes, it will be a deluge.”

Jedra and Kayan quickly dropped their packs and dug out their waterskins. They were none too quick; Jedra had just gotten his unstoppered when a fount of rusty water gushed from the spout, then a heavy stream of clear, cold water splashed onto the rocks. He and Kayan thrust their waterskins beneath the stream side by side, holding them there until they filled completely. Water!

They splashed it over themselves and drank thirstily from their cupped hands.

Kitarak pulled back on another of the levers and stopped pumping. The flow dwindled to a stop while he rummaged in his pack for his own waterskin—waterskins, it turned out. He had five of them, each twice the size of Jedra or Kayan’s. “If you don’t mind...” he said, holding the skins out to the two of them, then he turned back to the pump and the crank. He threw the lever forward again, and water flowed once more.

Jedra and Kayan filled Kitarak’s waterskins as well, then drank their fill and splashed each other with the remainder. At last, soaking wet and exuberant at their success, they began splashing Kitarak as well.

“Hold!” he cried out. “What are you doing? Did I ask for a shower?”

“Yes,” Kayan said, giggling. “I’m sure I heard you. Right, Jedra?”

“Of course,” he said, scooping a double handful of water and throwing it over the tohr-kreen’s iridescent back.

“Stop that!” Kitarak said. He stopped cranking and pumping, but the water continued to flow, and Jedra and Kayan continued to splash him and each other.

“What wasteful creatures!” Kitarak said, backing away. “I suppose you will wish to bathe next.”

Jedra laughed. “No thanks. We did that a couple of nights ago.”

The water finally quit running out of the spout, so Jedra and Kayan backed away and sat side by side on a rock, laughing and wringing the water from their robes. “I can’t believe it,” Kayan said. “We actually found water here. Who would have thought?”

Kitarak’s entire body quivered, spraying water droplets everywhere. “Did I not promise you?” he asked.

“Well, sure,” Kayan said, wiping the spray from her face. “It just didn’t seem very likely, that’s all, especially when we found you collapsed there.”

“Understandable,” Kitarak said. “But as you have seen, appearances can be deceiving.” He stepped over to his pack, which leaned up against one of the surviving walls of the pump house, and untied a many-bladed gythka head from the bundle of tools below the bag. Normally a long pole separated the two wicked blades, but this one had only a stub of a shaft, leaving barely room to grasp it. Not for long, though. Kitarak held it overhead, then spun it quickly, and with a hiss of sliding metal the shaft seemed to magically extend itself until it was nearly eight feet long.

Jedra backed uneasily toward the b’roh’g’s spear, which now seemed pitifully inadequate against the expanding gythka, but Kitarak paid no attention to him. The tohr-kreen bent down to his pack again and untied the curved, spiky throwing weapon, then stood and said, “Guard the pump. I will go hunt for food.” Before Jedra or Kayan could reply, he leaped straight over the wall—nearly fifteen feet—and came down with a clatter on the other side. They heard him kick off again, then all was silent.

“What do you think?” Jedra asked. “Do you trust him?”

Kayan laughed. “Do we have a choice?”

“We could make a break for it while he’s gone.”

“Break for where?”

Jedra had no answer for her. Tyr was the closest city they knew of, and it was at least five days away. They had water enough now—barely—but no food.

Kitarak had said he would hunt for some. He’d kept his promise about the water; maybe he would do the same with food.

As they waited for him to return, they heard occasional animal squeals that suggested he was doing just that. Jedra tried following him psionically, but he couldn’t see clearly on his own what the tohr-kreen was doing, and he didn’t think it was important enough to link up with Kayan to try it. When the sun dropped below the horizon and Kitarak still hadn’t returned, they flapped their robes to dry them before the night grew chilly, then settled into the protected corner of the pump house to take turns sleeping and standing guard.

* * *

Kitarak returned at dawn, bearing a rope from which dangled a slender, six-legged leathery kip at least a foot and a half long, a scaly z’tal lizard nearly that large, and a round, furry jankx as big as Jedra’s head.

“Breakfast,” Kitarak said nonchalantly, as if he had merely brought them an erdlu egg. He put Jedra and Kayan to work cleaning his kills while he set up another piece of tinkercraft from his pack. This was a metal grate surrounded by thin, curved mirrors that reflected sunlight from all sides onto it. He set the contraption in a shaft of light that slanted down into the well house from between two buildings across the way. The morning sun wasn’t particularly hot yet, but when Kitarak placed a strip of jankx meat on the grate, it immediately began to sizzle.

“Solar collector,” he explained proudly when he noticed Jedra eyeing the device. “Doubles as a telescope, though it’s very hard to collimate. I have a better one at home.”

“Ah,” Jedra said, nodding as if he understood. Then he suddenly remembered his lightning glass and dug it out of his pack. “like this?” he asked, holding his treasure out to Kitarak.

He had picked up the curved piece of glass from the sand after a templar had called down a lightning bolt to kill a slave who had stumbled while bearing the templar’s sedan chair. The glass made tiny upside-down images of things when he looked through it, and if he held it just right it would make a tiny spot of sunlight that burned anything he touched with it.

Kitarak took it from Jedra’s hand and looked it over casually. “Ah, yes, a flake off the top of a fulgurite,” he said. “Remarkably free of inclusions, too. Useful for starting fires, I suppose, but not optical quality, I’m afraid.” He handed it back to Jedra and adjusted his stove.

Jedra tried to hide his disappointment as he put the glass away. Dornal the mage had sold him into slavery to obtain that piece of ‘fulgurite.’ Certainly it held more value than Kitarak thought.

Breakfast soon took his mind off anything but food. They ate the whole jankx, and most of the kip as well. Kitarak adjusted the mirrors and cooked the z’tal more slowly while they ate, drying the thin strips of lizard meat rather than roasting them. When it was done he split it three ways and returned the cooker and his weapons to his pack. Then the three of them piled the boulders up around the wellhead again.

When the site had been returned to its former abandoned-looking state, Kitarak pulled on his pack and said, “We have water and food; now we hunt for treasure.”

“Treasure?” asked Kayan. “What sort of treasure could you find here?”

“Tinkercraft, of course,” Kitarak said. He led off into the ruins, his pack once again squeaking with every step. He moved at a much more leisurely pace this time, poking around among the ruins whenever he found any hint that something might have survived the ravages of time. He stayed pretty much to the center of the city where the buildings were better preserved, and ventured inside any that still stood.

Jedra and Kayan followed along for lack of a better plan, but they soon grew bored with his explanations of how counterweighted door-opening mechanisms worked or how the rectangular holes in the interior walls meant the buildings had been centrally heated. When he entered one particularly well-preserved building—this one three stories high and still capped with most of an angled roof—Jedra and Kayan told him they would wait in the shade just inside the door. Kitarak didn't seem to mind; he wandered off into the gloomy interior, poking his head into every room and shuffling through the debris on the floor as if he were looking for a misplaced pair of sandals.

It was a big building. The room they were in was at least fifty feet across, and that was just the first of many. Jedra and Kayan sat on a stone bench beside the door and listened to Kitarak proceed farther and farther, until his footsteps could no longer be heard and the squeaking of his pack blended with the sigh of air moving through the doorways and windows of the immense structure.

He's certainly a strange one, isn't he? Jedra mindsent, even though he was certain Kitarak was out of earshot.

I'm not sure I like it, Kayan replied. *No matter what he says, I've always heard that this "tinkercraft" of his helped bring about the destruction of Athas.*

I don't see how it could have, Jedra said. *Expanding gythka handles and stoves that cook with the heat of the sun are interesting devices, but they could hardly cause the destruction of the world.*

I just know what I've been taught.

By mages, Jedra pointed out. The templars were the people who wrote the histories, but most of the templars were magic-users. *Defiler mages at that, some of them anyway. Of course they aren't going to say magic caused it.*

I suppose you're an expert on the subject, Kayan said, her eyes wide and angry.

Of course not, Jedra said, but Kitarak had a good point. We can see defiler magic taking life from the world every time it's used. It makes sense that a large enough spell, or enough small ones, could have turned the world into the desert we live in today.

And so could a big enough cookstove, couldn't it? Kayan stalked back outside the building.

Jedra winced at his stupidity. He'd just attacked the basis of her former life; no wonder she'd gotten mad. Why was it every time he tried to talk with her they wound up arguing instead? He wondered if he ought to go after her and try to patch things up, but he was afraid he'd just make an even bigger mess of it. Better to give her a little time to calm down.

He leaned back against the cool stone wall and closed his eyes, but a familiar sensation made him open them again almost immediately. Someone else was in the building with him.

Not Kayan, nor Kitarak either. When he concentrated he could sense them both, but this was a much fainter awareness, even fainter than Kitarak's had been when he had been dying of dehydration. Jedra hadn't noticed it until now because Kayan's presence had masked it.

It came from the far wall, or beyond it. He picked up his spear from where he had leaned it beside the door and walked toward the source of the sensation, stepping over the shattered remains of furnishings millennia old, until he came to the wall. Yes, beyond there. He backed up until he reached the long, dark hallway and stepped carefully down it, spear held ready. The presence was in the second room.

"Come out slowly," he said aloud. "I know you're in there."

The awareness didn't change, which was not surprising, weak as it was. Whoever was in there must be nearly dead. Jedra stepped to the door and peered inside. The room had no window, but enough light filtered in through cracks in the outer wall for him to see a smaller room than the one in front, only twenty feet or so long and maybe fifteen deep, with a wide stone workbench set against the wall all the way around. The stone had been cut perfectly flat and polished smooth, and at regular three-foot

intervals atop the bench stood intricate rectangular frameworks of metal and crystal, now rusted and sagging under their own weight.

The awareness came from the near right corner, the one opposite the cracks in the walls. Jedra waited until his eyes adjusted to the dimness, then peered under the bench, expecting to see someone crouched there, but the space was empty. The bench itself held another of the metal frameworks, but nothing else.

There was definitely a presence of some sort in that corner, though. Jedra stepped closer and reached out to touch one of the crystals in the framework. It was about the size of his thumb and milky white in color, one of eight identical crystals mounted at the corners of an open cube. They *had* been mounted there, at any rate; three of the top four had fallen off after their supports had rusted through, and now lay on the stone slab.

The presence definitely came from the crystals—four of them, anyway—two in the framework and two on the table. The other four, as well as all the others in the room, were just crystals, like ones Jedra had seen worn countless times for ornamentation or used as magical talismans.

Jedra wondered what had been done to them to make them register to his psionic sense as though they were alive. Had some ancient magician stored life energy in them to power one of his spells? Jedra could hardly imagine a dead crystal holding much life energy, but maybe something happened when they were linked together, the way he and Kayan drew upon more power when they mindlinked than they could produce separately.

Or maybe the crystals were psionic. Jedra concentrated on one of them, but he didn't sense any contact. The mysterious life-force continued undisturbed.

The squeak of Kitarak's backpack and the scritch of clawed feet on stone came down the hallway.

"Kitarak," Jedra said when the tohr-kreen drew near, "I've found something in here."

The tohr-kreen stuck his bulbous head in the doorway. "Oh, those," he said when Jedra held up one of the crystals. "Yes, I saw them. Crystals."

Hah. Magical foolery. They're nothing. Come see what *I've* found." He waved something metallic in one claw, then headed on out of the building into the light.

Jedra looked back at the crystals. Worthless, were they? That's what Kitarak had said about his lightning glass, too, but Jedra didn't necessarily believe him. Feeling a little like a thief, he scooped up the three loose crystals off the bench and stuffed them in his pack, then hurried after the tohr-kreen.

Kitarak was showing off his discovery to Kayan. It was a short tube with a piece of glass at one end, mounted on what looked like a wedge taken out of a small wheel. A tarnished mirror about the size of a coin stuck out of the top of the wedge, and another one was mounted on one side, right in front of the tube.

"It's a *jernan*," Kitarak said. "Part far-seer and part angulator. Used for determining northness."

"Determining what?" Kayan asked.

"Northness. One's position north or south on the surface of the planet."

"The what?"

"The planet. Athas. Our world."

"Oh."

"Athas is round," Kitarak said impatiently, sensing that his explanation was going astray somehow. His voice grew more abrupt, filled with clicks and buzzing. "You can tell where you are on the surface by measuring how high the sun is in the sky. That's called your northness. The ancients had a way of measuring eastness as well, which is the position around the globe in the direction it spins, but that depended upon accurate timekeepers, and we no longer—"

"Athas is round?" Kayan asked.

"Of course it—" Kitarak stopped. "Never mind." He held the piece of tinkercraft up to his compound eyes, then lowered it again. It had obviously been designed for humanoid eyes. "Never mind," he said again.

* * *

Their exploration took on a slower pace after that. Kitarak found a few more incomprehensible ancient artifacts, but they were all in bad repair. Jedra didn't even know what to look for, and after he discovered a nest of stinging insects in one pile of debris he no longer bothered to search.

By midday, he and Kayan had sought refuge from the heat inside one of the few buildings that still had a roof, while Kitarak went into another across a wide, relatively rubble-free street. The building they sheltered in had once been magnificent. Rows of columns ran down either side of a central aisle toward a raised dais at the end opposite the door. Pedestals between the columns had once held statues, now shattered into marble fragments on the floor. There were no benches or even large blocks to sit on, so Jedra and Kayan sat on the floor with their backs to a column, glad of the cool stone and the shade, but not only because of the heat. All those stone blocks outside reflected a lot of sunlight, and it was hard on the eyes.

They didn't speak to one another for a few minutes. Kayan leaned back against the column and closed her eyes, so Jedra dug into his pack and took out the crystals he had found earlier. Two of them still radiated their mysterious essence, but the third was just a dead stone. As far as he could tell it was just a regular crystal, like the ones people wore for luck.

He could use some luck. He put the other two crystals back, then removed one of the leather tie-downs from the side of his pack and wrapped it tightly around the dead stone, tying it snug so the crystal couldn't fall out. He hung it around his neck, adjusting the leather cord so the crystal rested in the hollow between his collarbones. He didn't feel any luckier now, but who could tell?

He leaned back against the column, his shoulder brushing Kayan's. The soft rustle of his clothing echoed quietly in the ancient building, but when he sat still he could hear the quiet murmurings of air moving through the open windows and doors, or the creak of stones shifting as they heated up under the relentless sun. It was eerie. Jedra imagined those sounds to be the ghosts of the former inhabitants, peering at him from just out of sight.

The longer he listened, the more nervous he became. Anything was preferable to this. He finally worked up his courage and said, “Are you still mad at me?”

Kayan opened her eyes. “I was never *mad* at you,” she said automatically. She looked up at Jedra, then shrugged. “Well, all right, maybe a little. But not for long. I just don’t like it when somebody comes up with a wild theory and then assumes that it’s just as valid as all the knowledge that’s been taught for centuries.”

“Oh.” Jedra thought that over for a minute or two. When the silence threatened to overwhelm him again, he said, “I’m not arguing, but isn’t that where new knowledge comes from? People making up theories?”

She frowned. “Actually, I’m not sure if there can be any new knowledge. The ancients knew just about everything. We’ve forgotten a lot of it, but I think that’s mostly for the good, considering what they did with it.”

“You really think that?” Jedra asked incredulously. “You think we’re better off ignorant?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “Ignorant of some things, anyway.”

He tried to compose his thoughts. He didn’t want to annoy her again, but this was a side of Kayan he had never suspected. She’d been so eager to find a mentor who could teach them more about psionics, he’d just assumed she would be eager to learn anything. “What about us?” he asked. “Our ignorance is dangerous. We’ve killed people because we don’t know what we’re doing when we merge our minds. Are you saying we shouldn’t try to figure out how to control it?”

“We don’t need to. Other people already know how. They can teach us.”

“But what if they didn’t?” Jedra insisted. “What if this were something brand new? Shouldn’t we try to learn how to control it on our own?”

Kayan shifted her position on the unyielding floor.

“That’s a nonsense question,” she said. “Other people *do* know how to control it.”

“I’m just saying ‘what if?’.”

“And I’m saying it’s a pointless question. We need to find a psionics master, not speculate on what we’d do if there weren’t any.”

“I guess.” Jedra picked up a bone-white fragment of a statue—a nose, it looked like, though the tip of it was missing—and turned it over in his hand. “Where do you suppose we ought to start looking?”

“Tyr is still the closest city,” Kayan said.

Jedra nodded. “Tyr. Everything in my life seems to be pushing me to go there. I’m not sure I want to give in to it.” “Why not?”

“I have a bad feeling about it.”

She laughed. “You were headed there as a slave. That might color a person’s attitude a bit.”

Jedra laughed with her. “It might at that.” His laughter dwindled away quickly, though, and he said, “I still have a bad feeling about it.”

“We don’t have to stay there,” Kayan said. “We’ve got money; we could buy passage on a caravan to Altaruk or Gulg or Nibenay or somewhere.”

“And hope the Jura-Dai don’t decide to attack it,” Jedra said. He tossed the nose across the central aisle, where it bounced off a column and shattered into even smaller fragments on the floor.

The rattling sound continued long after the pieces had come to rest, and it took a moment for Jedra to realize that he wasn’t hearing ghosts. Kitarak was returning. The tohr-kreen ducked down to make it through the doorway, then took off his pack and rested it against the column beside the one Jedra and Kayan were using.

“Have any more luck?” Kayan asked him.

“None, regrettably,” Kitarak said. He took one of his waterskins from his pack and drank a few sips—the first water they had seen him drink since they’d given him their own. When he was done he put the skin away and said, “I think this city is nearly mined out. It is too close to the hinterlands.”

“Is that where you’re from?” Jedra asked.

Kitarak's lower arms jerked suddenly and scraped against his thorax, producing a scritch sound. "I couldn't say."

Touchy subject? It didn't matter. They weren't going to the hinterlands anyway. Jedra said, "Kayan and I were just talking about our plans. Thanks to you we've got food and water enough to make it to Tyr, if we start this evening."

"Tyr?" Kitarak turned his head first left, then right. "What do you expect to find in Tyr?"

"A psionics master, we hope," Jedra said. "Or failing that, at least passage to another city where we might find one."

"Psionics?" Kitarak looked away. "You mentioned that before. Said you could stop me with it if I attacked you. Could you?"

"Yes," both Kayan and Jedra said in unison.

Kitarak clicked his mandibles. Laughter? "Prove it," he said.

"What?" Jedra reached out for his spear, but Kitarak stepped forward and pinned it to the floor with one of his clawed feet.

"Prove to me that you have this power."

"Why?" asked Kayan. She looked unblinkingly at Kitarak, and Jedra realized she was getting ready to use her healing power on him somehow. Or maybe she would do to him what she'd done to Sahalik.

"I wish to see it."

"No, you don't," she said. "Trust me."

Kitarak hadn't made a move for his own weapons, but he didn't step back off of Jedra's, either. "I don't mean to be threatening, but if we are to be traveling companions, I must know what you are capable of."

"Who said anything about traveling together?" asked Jedra.

Kitarak rasped his lower arms against his thorax again. The vibration it produced was unpleasant, ear-piercing. "You said you were going to Tyr. So am I. Unless you plan to take a less direct route than I, we will be traveling together."

What now? Jedra mindsent to Kayan.

I don't know. I'm not sure I want him traveling with us.

Me either, Jedra said. On the other hand, he knows the countryside, and I still don't get any feeling of hostility from him, even now. He'd probably be good to have along, if we can just convince him we're not lying about our power.

Kayan said, Hah. Convincing him won't be a problem; keeping him alive while we do it will be the trick.

Maybe not, Jedra said. He's not like Sahalik; we might not have to be quite so direct with him.

What do you have in mind?

He smiled. Well, we're in a ruined city already. What's one more ruin?

Aloud, he said, "All right. You want a demonstration, we'll give you a demonstration. Come on outside." He stood up, leaving the spear and his pack where they lay. He offered Kayan a hand up, and the two of them walked out into the street.

Kitarak left his pack inside as well. He stood beside them in the street, cocking his bulbous-eyed head this way and that, while Kayan and Jedra blinked to regain their vision in the sudden light.

Link up, Jedra sent. He took Kayan's hand in his own, remembering that physical contact had strengthened the link before.

The rush was like a wind blowing through them, spreading well-being through every cell of their bodies. They felt their minds merging again, felt themselves become a new being. With Kitarak so close by, they tried not to imagine themselves with any kind of physical body, lest their psionic wings or claws do him inadvertent damage before they could get clear. Instead, they concentrated on the city before them, bringing every stone and every shadow into sharp focus. This time, now that they had seen it with their own eyes, they saw it as it was now, rather than in its former glory.

It was still impressive. The tallest remaining tower, nearly six stories high, stood only four or five buildings away, halfway down the next block on the same street on which they stood. Jedra and Kayan turned toward it, stretching out with their power, letting it flow through them, upward and

outward. They raised their hands to help direct it, palms out, arms slightly bent. They could almost feel the stone walls against their hands. A little more concentration, and they *could* feel the stone. They felt every crack, every joint, every rectangular window for the entire six stories on the side that faced them.

Then they pushed.

The building groaned. The massive wall resisted. Jedra and Kayan pushed harder, and slowly, inexorably, the wall tipped away from them. It didn't go over in one big slab; instead it buckled in the middle, and the top half, suddenly relieved of its support, broke into its constituent blocks and rained down like a sudden hailstorm.

The ground shook, and thunder rolled down the street. The lower half of the collapsing wall smashed through interior partitions as if they weren't even there, gutting the building, then twisting to the right as it toppled inward and knocking out the back wall as well. The whole building shuddered, and more stones fell. Then the third wall, the far one, crumbled away from the others and crashed down on the building behind it.

The fourth wall stood for a moment, a massive, six-story monolith with the ragged ends of floors sticking out from the side, then it tipped inward and did what the others failed to do: fell in one piece all the way to the ground.

Dust billowed up, obscuring the entire far end of the street. Jedra and Kayan struggled to keep their balance when the quake hit, and the renewed body awareness brought them out of their link.

They hadn't been merged long enough for the letdown to be as severe as before. They were able to stand and watch the dust cloud rise above the other buildings while they waited for the noise to die down enough to allow speech. It didn't die right away, though, and finally they realized why: The shaking had weakened the next building closer to them, and it was going down, too. This one was only three stories high—it was the one in which Jedra had found the crystals—but it fell with nearly as much impact as the first.

Kitarak didn't know they had only caused the first collapse directly; He turned toward them and shouted, "Stop it!"

"We can't!" Jedra shouted back. Helplessly, they watched the debris from the second building knock out the wall holding up the next one, which collapsed into the next, sending a wave of destruction up the street toward the three watchers.

Run! Kayan mindsent as she whirled around and did just that, dodging boulders and leaping through the rubble while the ground shook and more stones fell from the buildings all around them.

Kitarak was already in motion, but rather than sprinting down the street after her he ducked into the building they had just been inside. Jedra and Kayan's packs flew out the doorway, then Kitarak reappeared, dragging his own pack behind him.

Jedra grabbed both his and Kayan's packs and ran off after her. A section of cornice fell off the front of the building beside them and shattered, sending fragments everywhere. He felt a sting in the side of his right leg, but he kept running.

Kitarak passed him within twenty feet, leaping high on his powerful back legs even with his pack weighing him down. He ran all the way to the end of the block, through the intersection, and paused in the rubble beyond where the building on the right side of the street had already collapsed. Kayan stopped next to him, and so did Jedra a moment later. They turned around to watch the last of the buildings—including the one they had been resting in only a few minutes earlier—thunder to the ground.

Jedra was horrified at the destruction they had unleashed. True, the city was abandoned and nearly ruined anyway, but to see building after building destroyed because of something he did made him want to scream in frustration. He hadn't planned it this way. He couldn't let Kitarak know that, however. When the rumbling finally stopped, they stood together in stunned silence for a moment before Jedra said, "Was that enough of a demonstration for you?"

The tohr-kreen clicked his mandibles again and again, as if having trouble speaking. Finally, his voice still full of clicks and buzzes, he said,

“You didn’t have to do that! Throwing a single boulder across the street would have been enough!”

Kayan, picking up Jedra’s cue, said, “We wanted to make sure there was no doubt.”

Kitarak looked from them to the dust cloud—now drifting eastward on the breeze—and said, “‘Be careful what you ask for; you might get it.’ I did ask, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Jedra still felt guilty, but if Kitarak wanted to take responsibility for their mistake, let him. Maybe it would keep him from demanding any more demonstrations. “So are you ready to leave for Tyr now?”

Kitarak turned his compound eyes toward Jedra. This time there was no doubt what emotion his expressionless face was hiding. “Whether or not I am ready,” he said, “we must leave in any case.”

“Why?” asked Jedra.

“Because you have destroyed the well.”

CHAPTER FIVE

They had arrived from the south, climbing over piles of rubble for hours to reach the heart of the city. Now Kitarak led them westward along pathways he and others had cleared, and they reached the rocky plain beyond its edge in half that time. Turning to survey the ruins behind them, Jedra felt an immense sadness sweep through him. At one time, millennia ago, this had been a thriving center of life for thousands of people. What catastrophe had put an end to it? He would probably never know. But he would always know what had finished it off. The memory of all those high towers crashing to the ground would haunt him forever.

Nothing of value had survived. They had checked to be sure, but Kitarak had been right; the wellhead had been buried under tons of stone blocks. It would take hundreds of people with levers and ropes to dig down to it, and the likelihood that any of the pumping machinery had survived was practically nil. And without a water source, not even scavengers would come anymore. The city now belonged totally to the desert.

Kitarak turned away without a word and led the way into the vast rocky plain. He took long, slow strides, covering eight or ten feet at a time. Jedra and Kayan took three or four steps for every one of his, and soon they were puffing and panting to keep up.

Jedra had refused Kayan's offer to heal his leg where it had been cut by the flying debris. It was only a surface wound over the calf muscle; he could let it heal naturally rather than tire her out. He almost wished he had let her do it, because the salt in his sweat was making it sting like crazy. His other muscles were complaining just as badly, though. "You've got to slow down," he finally gasped. "We're not going to make it another mile at this pace."

Kitarak stopped and swiveled his head around. "Tyr is a long way away," he said.

"I don't care," said Jedra. "We can't walk this fast."

The tohr-kreen rasped his arms against his thorax again. Jedra was growing certain that was his way of showing agitation. "Can't your psionic power give you more endurance?" Kitarak asked.

"No," Jedra said. "At least I don't think so. Kayan?"

She was bent over, hands on her knees. She shook her head without looking up. "No, it can't. Maybe for a little while, but we'd just tire out even faster in the long run."

"How about levitation? Can't you lift and move yourselves with the same force you used to level the city?"

"I don't think that would get us much farther either," she said, straightening up. "We can explore mentally, but we always come back to where we started. Our bodies never go anywhere in the first place."

"Hmm," Kitarak buzzed. "This power of yours doesn't seem very useful for practical things."

"That's why we're looking for a mentor," Jedra said. "Somebody who can help us learn how to... ah... do more with it." He didn't want to admit that it was out of control most times.

"Toward what end?"

The question caught Jedra by surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what do you want to use the power for?"

"I don't know," Jedra said. "How about levitation, for starters?"

"Very good," Kitarak said. "Clever." He turned away and began walking again, but more slowly.

Over his spiny shoulder, he said, "What else can you do, besides push buildings over?"

How much do we want to tell him? Jedra mindsent to Kayan.

Don't let him know we can communicate without speaking, she sent back. *Or mind-merge. We may need the advantage if he's not what he seems.*

I agree.

Kitarak was waiting for an answer. Apparently he could see ahead and back at the same time; he didn't stop walking, but he didn't turn his head forward again, either. Aloud, Jedra said, "I can sometimes tell when people are watching me. Especially if they're a threat."

"That sounds useful," Kitarak said. It was hard to tell when his voice carried sarcasm, but he seemed sincere this time. "Anything else?"

Kayan said, "I can heal most wounds, if they're not immediately fatal."

"That definitely sounds useful. Can you heal a tohr-kreen?"

"I don't know. You want to hurt yourself and find out?"

Kitarak actually seemed to consider it. He tilted his head from side to side and rattled his mandibles like a person clicking his tongue. "No," he said at last. "Advance knowledge might lead to foolish risk-taking. I will proceed on the assumption that you cannot, and hope to be pleasantly surprised if I need your services." "Good idea," said Kayan.

"Of course." Kitarak said nothing more for a few minutes, merely turned his head to the front again and hiked on through the rocks at his steady pace. Now that he had slowed down, Jedra was glad to follow his lead; he didn't like being first in line through unfamiliar territory. But the tohr-kreen wasn't through. He turned his head back again and said, "Do you lust for power?"

This time it was Kayan who said, "What?"

"In my experience, there are two reasons for seeking knowledge," Kitarak said. "Simple curiosity and thirst for understanding is one, and lust for the power that knowledge can bring is the other. Which is your reason for seeking a mentor?"

"I don't think it's either one," Kayan said.

"Neither one! How can that be?"

"I've already got the power," Kayan said. "I just want to find out how to use it better."

Kitarak clicked excitedly. "Aha, you dodge the question. Why do you want to use it better?"

“Because!” Kayan said in exasperation. “I don’t like being ignorant. It’s frustrating and it’s dangerous.”

“Good,” Kitarak said. “Indeed, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. You have a certain wisdom about you. It’s crude and unpolished from too little introspection, but you do understand the basic issue. How about you, young Jedra? What are your reasons for seeking a mentor?”

“Power,” Jedra said immediately. “Greed. I want to rule all of Athas with an iron fist.”

“Do not take up gambling. You lie poorly,” Kitarak said, but he turned away and left Jedra alone, which was what Jedra wanted.

All the same, as they hiked on toward the afternoon sun the tohr-kreen’s question hung in his mind. Why *did* he want to learn more about psionics? It wasn’t just because his power was dangerous; he could simply stop using it if that were the case. No, there was definitely an allure to it that kept him coming back. Especially when he and Kayan joined minds. Every time they had done so it was because of some emergency or other, but he yearned for the time when they could do it for the sheer joy of the union. To share their thoughts and their emotions—to share everything that made them who and what they were—without fear of repercussions.

A wild thought suddenly came to him. Was he describing love? Did he want to do it for love? Jedra had never considered that possibility. Not just that he might be going on this quest with Kayan for love, but that he might love someone to begin with. It had seemed so unlikely when he lived in an alley in Urik that he’d never given it much thought, and when he had it had usually been with the same fleeting wistfulness he’d felt when he smelled the fruit growing on the other side of the palace wall.

Even after he’d met Kayan, he hadn’t thought of love. Circumstance had made them traveling companions, even bondmates, but even so they hardly knew each other. Could they...?

No, their attraction was purely mental. It couldn’t be love.

Then he remembered the kiss their first night alone in the desert, and the one the following day. How could he have forgotten that? He’d seen

enough in his years on the street to know that a kiss—or even much more than that—didn’t mean someone was in love, but it was one more piece of evidence in a growing list. He and Kayan seemed to argue a lot for lovers, but Jedra had seen that before, too. It wasn’t impossible...

He was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he plowed right into Kitarak’s bulbous abdomen when the tohr-kreen stopped suddenly. He nearly fell over, but managed to catch himself on Kitarak’s pack.

“Sorry,” he said, blushing. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“Obviously,” Kitarak said. “Fortunately, I have been. We are entering flailer territory, so be on sharp lookout.”

“What’s a flailer?” Jedra asked.

Kitarak rasped his arms again. “How did you make it this far into the desert on your own? A flailer is a six-legged beast with a hard shell that looks like a rock. When it hears you coming, it positions itself near your path, pulls its legs and head inside its shell, and waits for you to stumble into its backside—excuse me, they seldom find prey that stupid, so flailers wait for their prey to approach and attack when it draws close enough.”

Jedra blushed even harder. He hated looking like a fool in front of Kayan, especially now when he thought he might be in love with her.

She didn’t seem to notice. “They look like rocks?” she asked. The land around them was littered with reddish-yellow rocks of all sizes, from gravel to ones as tall as Kitarak.

“Yes,” said Kitarak. “Just like rocks. And don’t let that fool you into thinking they’re slow. They’re not, and they have claws on all six legs, plus a beak that could rip your fleshy little throats out in a second.”

Jedra looked beyond Kitarak. The land ahead looked no different than what they had been traveling through all afternoon: stones as far as the eye could see. What made this particular area so special? He could see no reason why a flailer—if such a beast existed—would prefer the stretch ahead of them to the one behind them. He was about to ask Kitarak how he knew when he thought of another explanation.

Maybe it was *all* flailer territory around here, and Kitarak had just spotted one. He seemed determined to test Jedra's and Kayan's abilities; maybe this was another trial.

Jedra focused on the path ahead of them. Was anything watching them from out there? Anything dangerous? He concentrated on a waist-high boulder a few hundred feet away. Nothing. Beyond that was a jumble, so he tried nearer to where he stood. How about that big one to the right, or that little one just in front of it? He moved his attention from rock to rock, getting nothing, nothing, nothing—something. And only thirty feet away or so!

He bent down and picked up a fist-sized rock in each hand. "Like that one?" he asked, then he flung one of the rocks over Kitarak's head toward the boulder with personality. The rock glanced off the side of it with a hollow thunk, and the boulder suddenly sprouted legs and a beaklike head on a long neck. It hissed angrily and took a step toward them, but when Jedra threw his second rock and whacked its shell again it backed away.

Kitarak made his rasping noise again. "Don't be too proud of yourself," he said. "It could have attacked us even at this distance."

"Then why did you stop so close to it?" Jedra asked. "You knew it was there."

The tohr-kreen shuffled from foot to foot, his pack squeaking madly. He obviously didn't want to answer. Had he planned to lead them past it and see what they did when it attacked? Jedra didn't like that thought.

He picked up another couple of rocks and tossed them toward the flailer, careful not to hit it this time. He just wanted it to know they hadn't forgotten about it. It hissed again, then turned around and lumbered away.

"I don't like tests," Jedra said to Kitarak. "And I don't like fighting, especially when it's not necessary."

Kitarak bobbed his head in an exaggerated parody of a nod. "Point taken," he said. "I will remember that." He began walking again, making a wide circle around the flailer.

* * *

The tohr-kreen was tireless. They stopped for a break only once that afternoon, just long enough to eat a few strips of dried z'tal meat and wash it down with a swallow of water, then didn't stop again until Jedra and Kayan finally called a halt long after sunset.

"We can't go any farther tonight," Kayan gasped, leaning against a rock for support. Jedra felt completely drained as well, worse than after a long convergence with Kayan.

"What?" Kitarak said indignantly. His tall, spiky body stood out in sharp silhouette against the night sky. "Certainly you may rest, but not all night. We have many miles to travel yet."

"We can do it in the morning," Kayan said. "Right now we're cold and tired and we need to sleep. Don't you?"

"Tohr-kreen do not sleep."

"Great. Well, humans do, and so do half-elves. You can stand guard."

Kitarak clicked and rasped in agitation, but it was obvious his traveling companions weren't going to move any more until they had rested. "Very well," he said. "Sleep then." He lowered his pack to the ground, removed the piece of tinkercraft he had recovered from the ruins, and began polishing its tarnished mirrors with a strip of cloth.

Jedra and Kayan found a low spot where a few inches of sand had filled in a hollow in the rock, and after making sure nothing else had claimed it ahead of them, they lay down to sleep. Kayan faced away from Jedra and pressed her back against him. He put his arms around her without prompting this time, even drew her close to him and folded his body alongside hers.

I never thought I'd say this about sleeping on the ground, but this feels wonderful, Kayan mindsent.

It does, Jedra replied.

I could sleep for a week. She paused, then added, *Do you trust him to keep watch?*

Jedra tried once again to sense any danger from the tohr-kreen, but he felt only the alien presence behind them. It was muted somehow—evidently Kitarak was already preoccupied with cleaning his treasure. When Jedra concentrated he felt an oddness to Kitarak's psionic impression, a sense of something more beneath the surface, but whatever it was, it didn't seem hostile.

I don't feel anything to worry about, Jedra said.

Good. I don't think I could do anything about it now even if you did. She tilted her head back. *Good night.*

Good night. They kissed. Her soft, warm lips drew all of Jedra's attention, and suddenly he felt himself slipping into convergence with her.

It flooded over them in a sudden rush of sensation, warming and tingling their entire bodies. They were no longer two people kissing; they were the kiss itself, a focus of energy swirling through that point of contact until their entire being existed only where their lips met.

Startled by the intensity of it, they pulled back. The link broke, but not with the devastating letdown of before. A far more primal connection was being forged. They paused with their lips just brushing, feeling each other's breath against their cheeks, tasting the delicious memory of the kiss.

Starlight twinkled in Kayan's eyes. "Wow," she whispered.

Jedra didn't trust himself to speak, not even with his mind. So he kissed her again.

Whether they mindlinked again or not, he couldn't say. There was no sudden transition, no moment of otherness—just an incredible rush of sensation and excitement.

Mmmm, Kayan sent. *Just wait until I get you alone.*

Jedra opened his eyes and looked at her. *That almost sounds like a threat,* he said.

She smiled mischievously. *Considering what just happened, it might be.*

He brushed her hair away from her neck and kissed her there. *That's a risk I'd be willing to take.*

Mmmm. Me, too. But not tonight. Not when we're already exhausted and with Kitarak watching.

Reluctantly, Jedra said, *Yeah, you're probably right. I wish you weren't, though.* He sighed and lowered his head to rest on his arm. Kayan turned away and pressed her back against him again.

Sweet dreams, she said.

* * *

His dreams started out sweet enough. Jedra imagined himself and Kayan all alone in the king's palace, romping playfully through the lush gardens and splashing one another in the fountains. After a long chase, he finally caught her around the waist and pulled her to him in a wet embrace, but she began to change, becoming a scaly, snarling reptile with ripping claws for fingers and thousands of sharp, triangular teeth in a wide, leering mouth.

He jerked awake with her snarl still in his ears. Another voice split the night: Kitarak shouting "Yeeahh!" in alarm.

Jedra heard the *snick* of the tohr-kreen's expanding gythka, and seconds later another snarl came from the darkness. Something was attacking!

The stars provided just enough light to see two ghostly silhouettes locked in battle: Kitarak with his gythka lunging at something long and low and reptilian that dodged faster than the tohr-kreen could swing his weapon. Jedra scrambled to his feet and grabbed the b'rohlg spear. Kayan was even faster; she'd still been enfolded in his arms a moment ago, but by the time he could whirl around and aim the spear toward the source of the noise she was already in front of him, running straight for it.

"No!" He shouted. "Kayan, get back!"

She answered with a scream of terror from behind him. Jedra turned to see her right where they'd been sleeping, struggling to stand while slapping frantically at her arms and legs. How could that be? She'd been in front of him a second ago.

She was still there, too. Jedra swung around with the spear again and saw her joining Kitarak in battling the lizard, but she had no weapon! Jedra watched, horrified, as she leaped at the creature with her bare hands.

“No!” he screamed again and ran forward with his spear ready to throw, but Kayan was in the way. And as he watched, helpless, the creature lunged for her. With one snap of its powerful jaws it tore her belly open clear to her spine. She fell to the ground like a rag doll, and the creature backed off, its mouth glistening with her blood in the starlight.

“Kayan!” Jedra screamed. He flung the spear with all his might, but he overshot the lizard’s scaly head. Worse, Kitarak chose that moment to attack, and the spear sailed straight into his side, punching halfway through his lower thorax and adding a ghastly parody of a third pair of arms just below his real ones.

The tohr-kreen turned his head toward Jedra in surprise, then with a rattle of exoskeletal limbs he collapsed on top of Kayan’s still-quivering body.

But another Kitarak still fought! He swung his gythka at the lizard again, and this time its multiple blade tore a gouge across the thing’s left flank. The lizard screeched and whirled around, whipping its tail out and knocking the gythka out of Kitarak’s grasp.

Jedra shook his head to clear it. Behind him, Kayan screamed again, and when he looked toward her he saw her standing where she had been before, clawing at her back as if something were biting her there, just out of reach.

When he turned his head once more, the Kitarak and the Kayan who had died were gone. Jedra’s spear was wedged into a cleft in the rock beyond the creature that was advancing on Kitarak, whose gythka lay on the ground between Jedra and the lizard’s scaly tail. Jedra rushed forward and picked up the strange metal weapon. The blade on one end looked perfect for chopping; he swung it high over his head and was just about to bring it down on the lizard’s back when Kayan leaped between them again.

“Get back!” he shouted, but she stood right in his way. “Strike it!” Kitarak yelled, backing frantically away. “I can’t!” Jedra jumped to the side,

trying to get around Kayan, but she stepped between him and the creature again.

He risked a look behind him. She was still there, slapping at herself as if she had a whole hive of insects crawling over her. Yet there she stood in front of him, too, right where he would hurt her if he made any kind of attack on the lizard. This one couldn't be her, it wasn't possible, but Jedra couldn't bring himself to strike down whoever or whatever it was.

Growling in frustration, he tossed the weapon over her head toward the tohr-kreen, who snatched it out of the air and swung it at the lizard's head.

Something seemed to be interfering with Kitarak's aim as well; what should have been a sure blow merely glanced off the thing's scaly hide. The creature lunged toward him, and Kitarak barely escaped its teeth by springing away with a powerful kick of his hind legs.

Jedra ran back to Kayan. "Link up!" he said, but she was so preoccupied with slapping and tugging at herself that she didn't hear him. He grabbed her arms. "Link up!" he shouted.

She struggled to break free of his grasp, and the look in her eyes was one of pure terror. Her face had twisted into a mask of agony, and her screams had dwindled for lack of breath to an almost constant moan of pain.

"What's wrong?" Jedra asked. "Kayan, what's the matter?"

"Agony beetles!" She writhed free of his grip and slapped at herself again.

"There's nothing there." Jedra grabbed her arms again. "Stop it. You're hurting yourself."

Another snarl from the lizard split the night. *Link up, now*, Jedra mindsent. He held Kayan tight against him, trying to establish the link on his own, but he couldn't. *Fight it!* he sent. *It isn't real.*

Kayan stopped struggling. Her body quivered exactly as if she were still being bitten, but a moment later Jedra felt the mindlink form.

It was like being dropped into liquid fire. Pain shot through every nerve in his body. If this was what Kayan had been feeling, then no wonder she'd

screamed. It was hard to maintain the link while such agony coursed through him, but this was their only weapon. Even though their intellects weren't completely melded this time, they were still more powerful than if they fought alone.

The creature's doing this, Jedra thought. *It's gotten inside our minds somehow*. He willed the pain to stop and felt it respond to his command. It didn't go away completely, but it no longer filled his entire consciousness.

He and Kayan turned their attention to the lizard creature. It wasn't a creature now; it was Kayan who stalked Kitarak, easily dodging his wild swings with the gythka. Kitarak flailed at empty air a few feet to her side, stabbing and slicing exactly as if something were there. Obviously he was having trouble distinguishing reality as well. Their psionic vision overlaid the starlit scene. In it, they saw the creature as a glowing knot of light, long colored ropes of it that stretched out to entwine around Kitarak and themselves.

Cut those, Jedra thought, imagining himself slicing through the light with his hands. The ropes flickered when he struck them, and the pain he and Kayan felt fled, then returned. The image of Kayan disappeared momentarily as well, but the tendrils of light reestablished themselves and the image and the agony returned. *Forget this*, Kayan said. *Let's just squash it flat*. Jedra winced at the thought. He knew it wasn't really Kayan out there, but all the same, he couldn't bring himself to attack whatever it was that fought in her image. And since it was his telekinetic power that their union amplified, Kayan couldn't initiate it herself.

Smash it! Kayan insisted, but he couldn't do it.

The Kayan thing leaped toward Kitarak, and this time it grabbed Kitarak by his left leg. Kitarak screamed and stumbled to the ground, and for just a moment as the creature concentrated on its attack, the image flickered backed to reality. In that instant, Jedra struck with all the force he had, greatly augmented by Kayan's presence. He imagined a huge hand swatting the lizard, crushing its body and blotting out its tendrils of light.

The ground shook. Thunder boomed, and the light flared bright, then died. The intense pain Jedra and Kayan had felt ceased instantly. Something

else flared around Kitarak, though, a different kind of light. A halo of bright blue radiance surrounded him in a glistening cocoon.

Jedra and Kayan unlinked, and looking with their normal eyes they saw Kitarak getting slowly to his feet. There was no halo of light in the real scene; here the tohr-kreen's body itself glowed blue. His light was strong enough to illuminate the ground a few yards around him, and by its glow they could see the crushed body of the lizard creature lying flat as a shadow at the bottom of a shallow depression of pulverized rock. Cracks radiated out from it in all directions, but where Kitarak stood they veered away, and the ground looked undisturbed in a tight circle around him. Kitarak himself looked healthy as well, except for the blue glow.

"Are you—are you all right?" Jedra asked him.

"It clawed me on the leg," Kitarak said, limping slightly and using his gythka for support as he stepped toward them.

"No, I mean the light."

Kitarak clicked his mandibles together. "Ah, yes, that." He ducked his head. "It's ah... it's... I'm fine."

"You're glowing blue," Kayan said. "How can that be fine?"

Kitarak looked back at the crater with the lizard at the bottom of it, then at Kayan again. "I am radiating the energy from your blow," he said. "It will fade soon."

"You what? How can you do that?"

Kitarak held his hands out in a four-armed shrug. "Ah... psionics," he admitted.

Jedra and Kayan looked at one another. *Psionics?* Jedra mindsent. *I thought he didn't like psionics.*

"No, it's magic I disdain," Kitarak said. "Psionics follows the rules of tinkercraft."

"You—you heard that?"

You should be more discreet with your sending. The voice in Jedra's head was definitely Kitarak's. The tohr-kreen crouched down carefully next

to Kayan, leaning to the side to keep from squashing his abdomen. He laid his gythka on the ground.

“All right,” Kayan said, bending down to examine his leg. Its glow bathed her face in blue light. “We’ll see if it works.”

“Wait a minute,” said Jedra. “Did he say something to you?”

She looked up toward him. “Yes, didn’t you hear it?” “No. But you—” he spoke to Kitarak “—you hear whatever we say to each other?”

“Yes,” the tohr-kreen admitted.

“You’ve been listening to us all along?”

Kitarak clicked his mandibles, then said, ““Don’t let him know we can communicate without speaking. Or mind-merge. We may need the advantage if he’s not what he seems.””

Jedra balled his fists angrily. “You... you lied to us!” Kitarak ignored his threatening posture. “I most definitely did not. You never asked if I knew psionics, and I chose not to tell you. I figured *I* might need the advantage.”

Jedra didn’t know what to say to that. While he fumed silently, Kayan bent over Kitarak’s injured leg and passed her hand along the deep gouge the lizard had made in his hard exoskeleton. The blue glow made the bones of her hand show up like dark shadows beneath her skin. “I don’t know if there’s much I can do here,” she said. “I can heal the tissue damage underneath, but most of the surface isn’t alive in the first place. I can’t heal that. Your leg will still be weak where it’s been clawed.”

“That will heal on its own, in time,” Kitarak said. “In the meantime, I will simply be careful with it. Repairing the inner damage will be fine for now.”

Kayan nodded.

“What was that thing that attacked us?” Jedra asked while she worked. “Another one of your little tests?”

Kitarak leaned back on his arms. “If it had been a test, I would not have been careless enough to let it reach me.

No, the tokamak was a surprise to me as well. I was too engrossed in repairing the jernan to notice its approach.”

“Tokamak?” Jedra asked. “I haven’t heard the name before.”

“That’s the tohr-kreen name for them. I have heard your kind call them id fiends. They project fear at their prey, so you find yourself tormented by whatever you are most afraid of.”

“I kept seeing Kayan getting hurt,” Jedra said. “That’s why I couldn’t hit it; Kayan was always right there.”

She looked up at him. “With me it was agony beetles. They were crawling all over me, going for my back so they could tap into my spinal cord and burn out my nerves.”

That would explain her frantic slapping. Jedra looked to Kitarak, who merely said, “Tinkercraft. Magically animated tinkercraft. I was able to see through most of the effect, but even I couldn’t block it entirely.”

“‘Even I’?” Jedra asked. “What do you mean by that? Who are you, anyway?”

“I am Kitarak,” Kitarak said. “Tohr-kreen noble of the House of Antarak.” He paused. “And psionics master.”

“Psionics master?” Jedra sat down heavily. “You knew all this time that we were looking for someone like you, and you didn’t say anything?”

“Seek and ye shall find,” Kitarak said. “You made a false assumption when you met me. I looked powerless and helpless, so you assumed I was. I allowed the deception to continue, for it gave me opportunity to study you.”

“You weren’t dehydrated?” Kayan asked. “I checked you psionically. You certainly seemed dehydrated.”

Kitarak clicked again. Definitely laughter. “I can seem many things when I choose to. Including disinterested. But in truth, I am very interested in you, and have been ever since I detected your presence over Tyr. Yours is the strongest manifestation of psionic synergy I have ever encountered.”

“You knew about us?”

“Oh, yes. I make it my business to be aware of the major psionic talents in the region. In fact, as soon as I noticed you I intentionally put myself in your path so I could meet you.”

Kayan bent back to her work on his leg, but Jedra said, “How did you know where we were going? We didn’t even know ourselves that we would go north.”

Kitarak leaned forward again and folded his arms together in a four-way knot. “What do you think made you decide to go north?”

“You?”

“Of course me. I drew your attention with a flash of light while you were searching for an oasis. I projected the image of the city for you to see when you came to investigate the light. And I planted an attraction in your mind so you would be sure to come, even though it may not have felt like the logical thing to do.”

Jedra couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Going to investigate the city hadn’t been his idea? Sure it had seemed a little reckless, but there hadn’t really been any other choice, had there? Kayan had thought so, but she had finally agreed with him to try it. Of course she had probably been under the tohr-kreen’s influence as well.

“Why did you lure us to an abandoned city?” he asked.

Kitarak looked away. Softly, he said, “I might have had to kill you. And strong as you were, it might have been dangerous to innocent bystanders.”

“Oh.” Jedra focused on Kitarak with all his ability, trying to see through the surface to the psionics master’s true intentions, but he still felt no threat. He had trusted that impression before, but now he wasn’t sure what to believe. It sounded like Kitarak could project whatever he wanted Jedra to receive, no matter what his real thoughts were.

Don’t worry, Kitarak mindsent to him. If I had wished to do you harm, I would have done so long since.

Well, that’s a relief, Jedra sent back, hoping the sarcasm would translate as well.

Evidently it did. Kitarak said, *You have an interesting attitude for one so naive. It's a wonder that hasn't gotten you killed by now.*

What attitude? Jedra asked, but Kitarak merely clicked his mouthparts in laughter for reply.

His blue glow had begun to fade already, especially along his leg where Kayan practiced her healing power. Evidently she was using some of the energy for her work. The glow had nearly disappeared from his entire lower leg when she leaned back and said, "That's as good as I can make it. How does it feel?"

"Good as new," Kitarak said. He stood up and tried his weight on it. "Ah, yes, I can still feel the weakness in the chitin. Hmm. I'm not sure I want to travel on it, especially with the added weight of my pack."

"Maybe we can splint it," Kayan said.

Kitarak weaved his head from side to side. "There is a better way... provided you're willing to accept me as the mentor you've been searching for."

Kayan looked to Jedra. *What do you think?* she asked.

I think it's pointless to mindspeak around him, Jedra replied.

"All right, then, what do you think—out loud?"

Jedra wasn't sure what he thought. Kitarak obviously knew his stuff, but...

"I don't know," he said. "It'd be hard to trust someone who started out manipulating and deceiving us."

Kitarak made a chittering sound. "Think of it as your first lesson: Don't let your initial impression blind you to hidden possibilities."

"That may be good advice," replied Jedra, "but the best lesson I ever learned on the streets was to never make the same mistake twice. I'm just trying to decide whether or not trusting you was a mistake the first time I did it."

"I have done you no harm. In fact, had I not diverted your path, you would have died of thirst and exposure before you got within thirty miles of

Tyr.”

“You don’t know that,” Kayan said. “We might have made it.”

“Yes, and mekillots might fly,” Kitarak said. “But knowing what I do of your abilities, I would give better odds to the mekillots.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Jedra said. Kitarak’s blue glow was definitely fading now. It no longer illuminated anything around him, only his own features. He looked cold, both physically and emotionally. His bulbous eyes never blinked, and his narrow, hard-surfaced head displayed no feelings that Jedra could read. Jedra wondered what kind of a mentor this alien creature would be, whether or not they would have enough in common to allow for true communication. Would Kitarak actually teach them what they wanted to know, or did he have his own agenda?

“What do you get out of this?” Jedra asked him.

“Satisfaction,” Kitarak said after a moment. “You are inquisitive, and you have potential. I would enjoy helping you develop your skills. Also, I have not had clutch-mates for many years.”

“Clutch-mates?” Kayan asked.

“Companions.”

“Oh.”

“So, do you want to return with me to my home and learn how to use this talent of yours?”

Jedra and Kayan looked at one another for a moment, trying to read in each other’s expressions what they couldn’t say aloud or in the mindlink. The trouble was, Jedra had no idea what he wanted to say. He didn’t trust the tohr-kreen as far as he could throw him, but on the other hand, this was probably the best—maybe the only—offer they were going to get.

He looked beyond Kayan to the crater with the flattened tokamak at the bottom of it, then to Kitarak, still glowing with faint blue light. If he hadn’t protected himself from Jedra and Kayan’s excess psionic force, he would have been killed along with the id fiend. Their original reason for looking for a mentor hadn’t changed; they were still dangerous.

But they might become more dangerous still, from some people's viewpoint, once they learned how to control their gift.

"What if you decide later on that we're a threat?" he asked. "Will you try to kill us then?"

Kitarak picked up his gythka from where he had placed it when Kayan had been healing his leg. He grasped it just below each head and twisted the shaft, and the metal tubes slid into one another again, shortening the weapon to less than two feet in length.

"Despite your facetious comment earlier about ruling the world," he said, "I don't believe that will become necessary. If it does, however, then yes, I will."

"Great."

"To do anything else would be uncivilized," Kitarak said. "That is one of the things I will teach you. I ask you for the final time: Do you choose to learn from me, or not?"

Jedra took a deep breath. Despite that unsettling admission, there could only be one answer, so he gave it: "Yes."

"Kayan?" the tohr-kreen asked.

She nodded. "Yes, certainly. But can it wait until morning? I'm exhausted."

Kitarak clicked merrily. "Yes, by all means, sleep. That will aid us immeasurably in returning to my home."

"You don't have to get sarcastic just because you don't have to sleep," she said.

"No, no," said Kitarak. "I meant it sincerely. The first thing I will teach you is how to dreamwalk." He walked over to where he had been sitting before the attack, picked up his ancient artifact and his pack, and brought them back to where Jedra and Kayan waited. "Lie down next to each other, like you were before," he told them.

They did as he said. Kitarak placed all three of their packs beside them, then knelt down next to their heads.

“I will put you into a light trance,” he said. “You will dream, but don’t try to direct it in any way, or you will wind up somewhere else. Let me control the vision.”

“All right,” Jedra said. He couldn’t have slept now if he had to, not on his own, but Kitarak extended clawed lower hands to touch his and Kayan’s temples, and Jedra felt himself growing sleepier. Within seconds, his breathing had slowed, and he drifted away.

Light suddenly blossomed as if he had just opened his eyes to daylight, but he hadn’t. The sensation wasn’t quite the same anyway. His field of view was broken up into dozens of hexagons, each one overlapping the next just a little so there were no blind spots, but it wasn’t a smooth picture like he normally saw. The colors weren’t right, either. The rocks were bright yellow, and the sky was deep purple. The stars were still out, shining much more brightly than usual, and each one was a different color. Jedra recognized some of the constellations, but now the tip of Drini the dwarf’s nose glowed red, and his eyes were different shades of blue.

He was seeing the world through Kitarak’s compound eyes, he realized. They were more sensitive than human or even elven eyes, but if this mosaic of separate images was how a tohr-kreen saw the world, then Kitarak could have it.

The field of view changed. Long, spiky, chitinous arms reached out as if from Jedra’s own body, drew on the tohr-kreen’s enormous backpack, and cinched the straps tight. Without turning, Jedra could see to the side where two short, fleshy creatures put on ridiculously small packs of their own. Himself and Kayan, he realized. This was how they looked to Kitarak: small, fragile, their flesh unpleasantly exposed and quivering on their bones when they moved. It was an unflattering image.

From Kitarak’s viewpoint, Jedra watched himself take one of the tohr-kreen’s extended arms while Kayan took another, then the three of them began walking to the southwest. It wasn’t a normal pace; each step they took moved them hundreds of yards in a long, smooth glide. They slid over boulderfields as if they weren’t there, rising and falling over the rolling hills with a hypnotic rhythm that matched their pace.

The feeling of internal movement was strange enough. Within Kitarak's body, Jedra could feel muscles sliding back and forth *inside* the hollow skeleton. His breathing came not from lungs in his chest, but from the pulsing abdomen that trailed behind like an ungainly sack tied to his waist. The extra arms were a complex knot of muscle and nerves that defied all experience, and the long, slender snout ending in its mandibles was a constant distraction in front.

Jedra tried to ignore it all and just remain a passive observer, but once he saw a flicker of motion off to the right, and their smooth stride faltered for a moment. They veered toward the source of the distraction, but Kitarak pulled them back onto the straight course before they reached it. A good thing, too; as they passed it Jedra saw another flailer feasting on the remains of some unfortunate animal.

The terrain grew more rugged the farther they went. The hills grew higher, and the valleys between them steeper. Some had become true canyons, the ground suddenly dropping away in sheer cliffs hundreds of feet deep. There would often be no warning that one was there until the dreamers were right on top of it. Such terrain would have proved nearly impassable to travelers on the ground, but Kitarak's pace never faltered; he stepped over the chasms as if they were merely cracks in his path.

We wouldn't have made it on our own, Jedra thought when he saw them. He got no reply; this was evidently not like a mindlink.

The sky seemed to be traveling faster, too. The stars slid westward almost as quickly as they did, and the sky was growing light behind them when Kitarak stopped at the rim of a small canyon. It seemed identical to all the others they had crossed, but Kitarak unerringly found a pathway leading down to the bottom of this one, and he led the way down the narrow trail, going ahead while Jedra and Kayan followed.

The bottom of the canyon was a flat, sinuous channel that had once held a river, but not for many centuries. There was evidently still moisture in the ground, however; a few stubby bushes grew in the cracked soil, and even a tree grew near the edge of a big rock pile.

Kitarak stepped closer to the rock pile, and Jedra saw that he had misjudged it. It was a house. He hadn't recognized the curved walls at first because they weren't smooth or even straight up and down. They were made from unmortared stone, and they bulged in odd places, giving the whole structure the appearance of a haphazard pile of rocks. Kitarak walked around to the back side of the structure and tugged on what looked like a loose piece of shale sticking out of a slanting gravel slope, and the whole business swung out on silent hinges. The gravel had been glued to a stone slab door.

A white, smooth-walled entry led into a hemispherical central room, its walls also finished in white stucco or something similar, and the whole space lit from milky-white skylights shaped like the hollow insides of rocks. From outside, Jedra supposed, they would look just like all the others in the pile.

Two circular cushions on the floor were the only furnishings, aside from the narrow stands supporting sculptures and the shelves on the walls holding hundreds of tinkercraft artifacts. Doorways led off in four directions from the central room, but Kitarak knelt down on one of the cushions and motioned for Jedra and Kayan to lie down on the other. When they had done so, he reached out with his lower hands and touched their heads.

For Jedra, the sensation felt as if his mind had been poured from one vessel to another. He had been in Kitarak's viewpoint, but when the tohr-kreen awakened him he suddenly felt his consciousness slide back into his own head. He blinked, and the room came into focus without the hexagonal array. He sat up and felt the welcome response of his own body moving to his commands.

Kayan sat up beside him, blinking and flexing her arms and legs as well. She ran her hands over her body as if reaffirming that everything was still there.

Kitarak merely tilted his head and looked around the interior of the room. "Ah, yes," he said. "Here we are. Welcome to my humble abode."

This was humble? Jedra felt as if he had just awakened in a palace. The waking in itself was incredible enough, miles away from where he had gone to sleep, but the surroundings managed to overshadow even the method of travel. He looked around at all the things on the walls, at the paintings and other artwork, at the unfathomable pieces of tinkercraft—some of it art in its own right—and thought, *Yes, this was a good decision.*

CHAPTER SIX

Kitarak stood up and held out his hands. “Come, let me show you the rest of my home.” He led Jedra and Kayan through one of the doorways into another skylit room, this one smaller and filled almost entirely with books. Shelves full of them lined the walls, and more rested in heaps on cabinets. None of the walls were straight—the room extended off the central one like a petal from a flower—but Kitarak had custom-built everything to fit.

Irregular-shaped windows looked out through nooks in the rock, preserving the house’s camouflage while providing even more light than in the skylit central room. Another circular cushion in the middle of the floor had the much-rumpled look of long use. It was obvious that Kitarak spent a great deal of his time here.

Kayan admired the library. “There are more books here than in the templar archives,” she said.

“More valuable ones, too, I’ll bet,” Kitarak said. “Some of these date back to the collapse.”

“I’d love to read them,” said Kayan, picking up a cracked leatherbound volume from one of the stacks and opening it carefully.

Her face fell, and Kitarak laughed his clicking laugh. “You’re welcome to try, but first you’ll have to learn the language. Don’t worry; it took me only five years.”

Kayan set the book back on the stack. Jedra didn’t bother to pick up one; no matter what language it was written in, he wouldn’t be able to read it. He had never learned that skill. Maybe he would be able to now, but by the sounds of it that would take a while.

All the rooms in the house were interconnected. Kitarak led Jedra and Kayan through a side doorway from the library into another room, this one much less orderly. A chest-high workbench ran along the circular outer wall, and on it rested the disassembled remains of more tinkercraft gadgets.

Parts lay strewn everywhere, and more filled boxes on the floor. The odor of metal and oil was strong here.

“This is my workshop,” Kitarak said. “Don’t touch anything in here without my permission. Some of the equipment can be easily damaged, and some of it could easily damage you.”

Jedra was about to pick up a twisted piece of metal from the workbench; he dropped his hand instead and backed away.

The next room was the kitchen. Kitarak had built a stove into the outer wall, and cabinets on either side of it provided work surface and storage. A wide basin had been set into one cabinet, and beside it a hand-pump provided water from a well dug directly beneath the kitchen. Trust Kitarak to have an indoor well, Jedra thought. He was relieved to see that it had just a single up-and-down handle; he wouldn’t have to learn how to operate all that arcane machinery the tohr-kreen had used in the ruined city. Pots and pans hung from hooks overhead—nearly out of reach for Jedra, and definitely out of reach for Kayan.

“Can either of you cook?” Kitarak asked.

Kayan shook her head. “The templars all took their meals together. Slaves did the cooking.”

Kitarak looked at Jedra, who said, “I’ve scorched many a lizard over a campfire, but I’ve never used anything like this.”

The tohr-kreen made his rasping noise with his arms. “I can see there is much to teach you,” he said.

Jedra was beginning to feel uneasy. It looked like he would have to learn reading, cooking, and maybe even tinkercraft along with psionics. How much else had he gotten himself into?

From the kitchen they went into the storage room. This was much cooler than the others, with no windows or skylights. In the dim light filtering in from the kitchen they could see sacks of vegetables hanging from hooks and a rectangular wooden chest nearly as tall as Kayan standing on end against the wall. When Kitarak opened its door, tendrils of white vapor wafted outward and a cold draft spread across the floor. Inside,

haunches of meat were packed tight, and a pebbly white layer of frost coated them all. Jedra had seen frost only once in his life, on an exceptionally clear night after a cloudy day, when all the heat had radiated into the sky.

“Is this some kind of tinkercraft?” he asked.

Kitarak weaved his head from side to side. “No. I have tried for years without success to design a mechanical cold-maker. Instead, I must still use psionics to slow the dance of particles that makes things hot.”

“I didn’t know it was possible to make something cold,” Jedra said. “Why don’t the templars use it to cool our cities?”

Kayan said, “I don’t think the templars know it’s possible, either. At least I’ve never seen it done before.”

“There is another problem with your idea,” Kitarak said. “The heat must go somewhere. With a cold-box, there isn’t enough to worry about, but the heat from an entire city would be very hard to disperse safely. More likely it would burn the psionacist to ashes, and all the buildings around him as well.”

Kitarak closed the door again and led them into the last room, this one also used for storage. This was the catch-all room, however. It looked like a junk dealer’s stand in the market. There was a pile of sticks for the fire, a stack of tools, cloth sacks of unknown contents, and more various possessions scattered about than Jedra had ever seen in one entire home. Like the artifacts and tools in the other rooms, most of the collection was metal. No doubt about it, Kitarak was rich. For the first time, Jedra felt inclined to believe his claim to nobility.

“This will be your room,” Kitarak said. “We can move most of this material into the workshop and store the rest outside.” He shoved a wooden crate aside and stepped into the center of the room, where the hemispherical roof was high enough for him to stand erect. “You will need a bed if you wish to sleep. Will one be sufficient, or do you require two?”

Jedra blushed immediately. Kayan didn’t turn red until she saw him doing it, but then she made up for lost time. She stammered, “I—um—one

is fine with me. I mean, if that's all right with you."

"That would be fine," Jedra said, trying not to sound too eager, but then he wondered why not. He should let Kayan know that he was. "I'd like that very much," he said to her.

If Kitarak noticed anything unusual he didn't mention it. He merely bobbed his head up and down and said, "Very good. One bed, then. We can use one of the mats from the great room." He held his arms out, two of them forward and two to the sides, and said, "Clearing this out to make room for a bed will provide your first lesson. We will move it all without touching it."

* * *

Telekinesis, it turned out, was quite a bit like Jedra's existing ability to shove things around with his mind. It just required more control. Kitarak helped him with that, mindlinking with him and showing him how to imagine an object rising gracefully into the air and gliding through the house into the storeroom.

Merging minds with the tohr-kreen was nothing like doing it with Kayan. There was no sense of expanded ability or heightened awareness, only the extra presence guiding his thoughts. They weren't necessarily pleasant thoughts, either. Kitarak's mind worked differently than Jedra's. When he imagined grasping something in his hands, Jedra felt a wave of aggression sweep through him, as if every acquisition, no matter how small, were a form of conquest. It distracted him, and he was glad when Kitarak unlinked and let him proceed on his own.

At first Jedra had to follow along behind whatever he moved so he could make sure it didn't bump into walls, but once he learned the layout of the house he could stay in one place and simply imagine the whole trip. Kayan, on the other hand, couldn't get the hang of it. First Kitarak, and then Jedra, tried to explain to her how it felt when their minds grasped whatever they tried to lift, but the concept remained foreign to her. Even mindlinking

didn't help. When Kitarak tried to link with her, Kayan began to shudder and breathe rapidly, and when Jedra tried it she couldn't concentrate on the telekinetic feeling amid the swirl of other sensations.

Her nervousness and frustration kept them from achieving perfect rapport, but it was still close communion. *All right, Jedra said, let's just try it once while we're linked and see if you can feel what it's like that way.*

I don't think that's a good idea, said Kayan. We're barely in control here.

Sure we are. I've got this down. It's easy, see? He focused their combined attention on a small crate of rocks—mineral samples or maybe even gemstones in the rough, knowing Kitarak—and imagined them rising into the air.

A sharp crack startled them, and sunlight suddenly streamed in through an extra hole in the roof. Rock chips and dust rained down around them, and a moment later the house echoed with dozens of impacts as the rocks from the crate fell back onto the roof. There was a crash of breaking glass from the main room, and Jedra looked in to see a stone bounce off the floor after smashing through one of the skylights.

Their mental convergence had shattered as well. They stood there in the storeroom, alone with their own thoughts, while Kitarak examined the new skylight in his house. At last the tohr-kreen looked down at them and said, "You do have a significant problem to overcome, don't you? Let us go outside and try it again."

They practiced all morning, but Kayan simply couldn't pick up the telekinetic power. Linked together, she and Jedra could send boulders clear over the rim of the canyon, but on her own she couldn't even budge a pebble. At last Kitarak put an end to the attempts. "It's clear you simply don't have that talent," he said as he lowered a new stone into place over the hole she and Jedra had made in his storeroom roof.

She watched the head-sized rock drift lazily into place, followed by dozens of smaller ones to seal the gaps. "Damn it, it's not fair," she said, her face red from effort and anger. "You and Jedra can do it without even breaking a sweat."

Kitarak put the last of the patch into place, then turned to her. “Our brains are all unique. That means we each have abilities that others do not, and others have abilities that we do not. This is a fact of life. Surely you have experienced it before.”

“Yes, but—” She swallowed. “Not *with Jedra*.” She looked over at him, standing helpless beside the tohr-kreen, and suddenly Jedra knew what she felt. They were supposed to be bondmates, supposed to share everything, but here was evidence of a fundamental difference between them that would never be reconciled.

It didn’t have to be a problem, though. “We’ll always be able to share whatever each of us can do,” he reminded her.

“Sure,” she said. “And we’ll always be knocking holes in people’s houses, or tipping over entire cities.”

Kitarak rasped his arms together. “We will train you to overcome your lack of control.”

“Like you trained me to lift things psionically?” Kayan turned away and stomped off toward the lone tree that grew on the other side of the house.

“Kayan?” Jedra took a step after her, but Kitarak grabbed him by the shoulder. Jedra winced, remembering what went through Kitarak’s mind when he grasped something.

Kitarak released him again, however, and said, “Come, let us leave her to resolve her anger in her own way.”

Jedra wondered if that was a good idea. In his experience, people who stomped away mad usually wanted to be comforted, but he didn’t want to defy Kitarak, who was the teacher, after all. So Jedra reached outward with his danger sense, and when he found no threat to Kayan’s safety he turned away and went back inside with the tohr-kreen.

He helped Kitarak pick up the pieces of skylight in the main room. They were shaped like the surface of a rock, but thin enough to be translucent, as if Kitarak had peeled a shell off one. From outside, the

skylight would be indistinguishable from a regular rock. “How did you make this?” he asked.

“I will show you,” Kitarak replied, taking a quadruple handful of pieces into his workshop. He placed them in a ceramic tray on the bench, then set a thick candle in a stone bowl beside the tray. “Can you light the candle?” Kitarak asked.

“I left my flint and steel in Urik,” Jedra said apologetically.

“Hint and steel?” Kitarak said, sounding offended at the very idea. “Oh, no. Here. Look at the wick. Imagine it made of tiny particles, all of them wiggling about but never escaping. Now imagine them wiggling faster. Make them move faster and faster until they grow hot from the effort.”

Jedra concentrated on the candle for a moment, trying to see it as Kitarak had described. It was difficult, since he had never considered before what something as simple as a candle wick was made of, but eventually he managed to think of it as a long thread of fine sand held together by some kind of flexible glue. He imagined the sand flowing back and forth along the wick, surging from one end of it to the other...

...and the wick burst into flame with a soft pop, all along the length of the candle. The wax slumped into a puddle, and the wick snuffed out again in the liquid wax.

“Very good!” Kitarak said. “But next time, focus on just the part sticking out the top.” He held his upper hands around the cup and the wick lifted up again, then the wax flowed up to coat it and solidify in layers until there was none left in the bowl. “Try it again,” Kitarak said.

This time Jedra got it right. When the candle was burning normally, Kitarak said, “All right, now we amplify the candle’s heat and melt the glass.”

“Why don’t we just wiggle the glass particles until they get hot enough?” Jedra asked.

“Try it,” Kitarak said.

Jedra did. He imagined one of the glass shards as another bunch of tiny sand particles, imagined them moving faster and faster and faster...

The glass began to glow a dull red color, but no matter how hard Jedra tried to move the particles faster, that was as hot as he could make it. *He* was getting plenty hot, though; sweat ran down his forehead and dripped off the end of his nose.

“That’s enough,” Kitarak said. “Don’t wear yourself out.”

Jedra took a deep breath and relaxed. “Why couldn’t I melt it?” he asked.

“Because that way isn’t very efficient,” Kitarak replied. He set the candle closer to the tray. “Amplifying, on the other hand”—he waved both hands on his right side for emphasis—“takes what is already there and simply makes more of the same. Much more efficient. Now concentrate on the candle and imagine its heat flowing into the glass. Then once you get that, imagine more and more heat coming from it until the glass melts.”

Jedra nodded, and they both began to concentrate. The candle flame flickered, grew brighter, then dimmer. It didn’t grow smaller, but the bright blue and yellow center became dull red, and after a few minutes the glass shards in the tray began to glow yellow. Jedra noticed that even with its reddish flame, the candle diminished at an alarming rate.

Another few minutes and the glass shards slumped into a puddle on the bottom of the tray. “Good,” Kitarak said. “Now we simply form it into the right shape and let it cool.” The molten glass bulged upward, inflating into a hemisphere, then crinkling into nooks and fissures to resemble the surface of a rock.

Jedra heard a thump from beyond the central room. It turned out to be Kayan closing the door; he heard her walk across the room to look in at him and Kitarak at the workbench. “Learning more tricks, I see,” she said.

“Yes,” said Kitarak. “Come, you may try it, too.”

“No thanks,” she said. “I’ve had enough disappointment for one day.”

She turned to leave, but Kitarak spoke sharply. “No. You came here to learn, so you will learn. Come try this.” The shell of glass hovered above the tray, then drifted toward Jedra. “Here,” Kitarak said to him. “Take this—not with your hands!—and go put it in place.”

Jedra levitated the fragile skylight carefully, conscious of Kayan's smoldering anger at his ability to do so, but unwilling to disobey Kitarak. He backed out of the workshop with the glass and took it outside, where he carefully climbed atop the house and cleared the hole until the new skylight fit snugly in place. The whole time he was working on the repair, he could feel Kayan's presence below him, her mind seething with resentment.

If anger could melt glass, he thought, she would have no trouble with this lesson.

* * *

Kayan didn't speak to him until that afternoon. Jedra had cleaned out the rest of the storeroom while Kitarak showed her how to melt glass, and he had floated a cushion from the main room into it for a bed. Since he was momentarily free to relax, he decided to try the bed for a short nap, the way he used to spend hot afternoons at home, but he had just lain down when Kayan stepped into the room.

He sat back up. "How did it go?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I evidently don't have any telekinetic ability at all."

"Oh."

She didn't come in and sit down, didn't react at all, so he stood up and held her in his arms. "I'm sorry."

She laid her head against his shoulder. "Me too."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I can do it, and you'll always have me."

"Jedra, that's not the problem. I don't *like* knowing there's something I can't do." She pulled away from him, then crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm sorry," he said again, not knowing what else to do.

She sighed. "I'll get over it," she said, then she turned away and went into the library.

But she didn't get over it. Not that day, nor any thereafter. Each passing day only produced another frustration for her as Kitarak tried one method after another to teach her what he knew of psionics. Some things she could pick up instantly, especially those powers that dealt with healing or metabolism in some way, and she was a quick study in the telepathic arts as well, but anything to do with telekinesis remained beyond her ability. It didn't matter to her that Jedra couldn't heal so much as a minor scratch, or that neither of them could teleport or even dream-travel the way Kitarak had done; no, all that mattered to Kayan was that Jedra could move things with his mind and she couldn't.

Kitarak held their training sessions in the central room, the "great room" as he called it. The three of them spent most of their time there, sitting on cushions while they learned how to manipulate light and sound, how to read minds and blank their thoughts from other mind-readers, and how to enhance their other senses. At least once a day he also took them outside into the dry canyon bottom and showed them how to fight with their minds and how to defend themselves from attacks both mental and physical.

After so much time together, they tended to seek out privacy during their few hours of free time. Kayan took to spending most of hers in the library, reading old books and ignoring Kitarak and Jedra whenever she could. At night she slept on the same bed with Jedra, but she might as well have been on the other side of the house for all the affection she showed. Jedra found himself wishing they were back in the desert again; at least it got cold enough there to require snuggling to stay warm.

Only when they joined minds did they have any kind of rapport. That was as good as ever, but it ultimately led to even more frustration because every time they did it they felt as if they'd resolved their problems, only to come down and find that they hadn't. They learned much about psionics that way, for Kitarak found teaching them easier when they were linked, but they both came to dread the long drill sessions, especially when the tohr-kreen focused on something they couldn't each do separately. And since

Kitarak didn't need sleep, he drove them to exhaustion every day, which didn't help their frayed emotions either.

Jedra remembered thinking how wonderful it would be to mind-merge with Kayan just for fun, sometime when they weren't under attack. Kitarak's tutelage occasionally felt like an attack, but Jedra knew he was just trying to drive them to excel. All the same, the constant stress was becoming hard to take. It would be nice to relax for a while, maybe try to work things out with her.

Finally one night, nearly two weeks after they had arrived at Kitarak's home, Jedra waited for Kayan to come to bed from another late reading session, and as she undressed in the dark he said softly, "Kayan?" He would have mindspoken, but even with practice in narrowing his focus, he didn't trust Kitarak not to listen in.

"Hmm?" Kayan paused in midmotion, a black silhouette against even greater blackness.

Jedra could have amplified the light reaching his eyes until he saw her as clearly as by daylight, but he respected her privacy. He looked up at the ceiling to remove the temptation and said, "Do you remember the first time we joined our minds just for pleasure?"

She finished pulling off her shirt, one she had made herself only a few days ago from an old cushion cover. "No," she said.

"That's because we never have."

"Yes, we did," she said, automatically gainsaying him.

"When?"

It took her a moment to come up with a reply, but she finally said, "That first night in the desert with Kitarak, when we kissed each other goodnight."

Jedra thought back to that night. It seemed a million years away, but he still remembered it clearly. "That was an accident," he said. "Not that I minded," he hastily added.

Kayan tossed her shirt into a corner and drew on her nightshirt: the robe the elves had given her, now laundered. "So what's your point?"

“My point is, why don’t we do it again?”

“Because I’m tired,” she said, sitting down on the bed. “And I’m in a bad mood, and I have a headache.”

“All of which will go away instantly when we merge,” he said.

“And all of which will come back to haunt me tenfold when we separate again,” she replied.

“I bet it doesn’t.”

“What do you know about it? It’s not your headache.”

“Want to bet?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Jedra reached out and took her hand, using his light-amplification ability just enough to guide him. “It means I’m not exactly happy here either, Kayan. I had no idea it would be like this. I wanted to live happily ever after with you, not spend most of my time feeling guilty about what I can do or jealous of what you can do.”

“There are no happily-ever-afters in this world,” Kayan told him. But she didn’t take her hand away.

Jedra pulled her gently back until she lay beside him. “So let’s go to another one,” he whispered. “Just for tonight. Forget Kitarak, psionics practice, and everything else. Let’s spend tonight in our own world, just you and me and no cares whatsoever.”

Kayan said nothing for quite a while. Jedra gave her time to think it over. He knew that any more coaxing would only make her decide against him. This had to be as much her idea as his in order for her to accept it, so he had to give her time to make her decision.

She was taking forever, though. He was afraid she had simply fallen asleep, but she finally rolled over to face him and said, “All right. Tonight let’s mindlink just for the fun of it. No cares whatsoever.”

Jedra let out a deep breath he hadn’t even been aware he was holding. “Thank you,” he said.

She laughed, the first time he had heard her do so in weeks. “Hang on to your hat,” she said. “We may end up miles from here.”

She leaned forward, and Jedra didn’t need night vision to know that she was waiting to be kissed.

When their lips met, so did their minds. Warmth and excitement swept over them, the perfect blend of emotional and physical stimulus drawing them deep into new realms of sensation. Kitarak and his lessons, Kayan and Jedra’s inequalities—all dwindled to insignificance in the face of the sudden, urgent imperative to experience every possible aspect of their convergence.

They didn’t return to consciousness until morning, and when they did they were so exhausted they didn’t even try to get up, not even when the aroma of the breakfast Kitarak was cooking wafted into their bedroom. They lay in a tangle of clothing and blankets, Jedra on his back and snoring softly while Kayan rested her head on his chest, and neither of them moved until noon.

After that, things changed. Not entirely—if anything, they were even more competitive by day—but they spent their nights exploring new territory that even Kitarak didn’t suspect existed. If he noticed, he didn’t mention it, but he didn’t ease up on them, either. When they began to fall asleep during their lessons he merely taught them how to suppress their bodies’ need for sleep and continued with his instruction.

Jedra lost track of how many things he learned. Most of them were becoming instinctive after so much repetition. When he entered a dark room, he amplified what little light was there until he spotted a candle, then he agitated the wick into flame. When he needed to speak to Kitarak or Kayan, he did it telepathically unless they were already in the same room. When he wanted something, he detached a part of his mind to search it out, then brought it telekinetically to where he needed it.

And when he wanted a drink, he levitated water from the well, just as Kitarak had done when they had been with him in the ancient city. The tohr-kreen had laughed his clicking laugh when he explained how he had deceived them. “The pressure tank hasn’t held air for millennia,” he told

them. “Only a psionacist or a mage could lift water through those rusty pipes.” Then he had sobered and said, “Now, of course, it would take more than that.”

Once again, Jedra felt guilty at the memory of the destruction he and Kayan had caused. They were learning how to control their power now, but that didn’t erase what they had already done. Nothing could do that.

Only using the power better in times to come could make up for their earlier excesses and build their confidence in themselves.

Confidence came with practice, but that, Jedra soon learned, was not enough. Even though they now mind-linked for pleasure as well as for study, something still came between them. Kayan seemed aloof, as if she had somehow lost her respect for him. Maybe it was *because* they mindlinked for pleasure... or maybe it was something else.

He figured it out one evening when their studies were over and she had gone into the library as she usually did. Jedra usually went outside to relax after their training sessions, but the wind was blowing and he didn’t feel like expending any more energy to still it, so he came back inside. Kitarak was busy in his workshop, so Jedra went into the library and sat beside Kayan on the cushion. She was sitting cross-legged, a book on her lap. She wore a simple tunic made from rough gray cloth she had discovered in the things they’d moved from the storeroom, but she looked good in it. And Jedra liked the way it rode up on her bare legs, now tanned a golden brown.

She looked up from her book, a thick, heavy volume with dark scrollwork in the margins and rows of black squiggles filling the centers of the pages.

“What are you reading?” Jedra asked.

She showed him the cover. More squiggles. “A history of the healing arts.”

“Oh. Is it interesting?”

She frowned. “No, it’s boring me to tears. That’s why I’m reading it.”

“Really?”

Her frown deepened. “Of *course* it’s interesting. Don’t you recognize sarcasm?”

Jedra felt himself turning red. “Sorry. I’ve never read a book, so I didn’t know. I’d heard they could be boring, though.”

“Maybe to your kind of people,” Kayan said, “but they’re never boring to someone who understands them.”

“My kind of people?” Jedra asked. “What, half-elves? I’ve known half-elves who could read. One of my best—”

“I meant people who grew up in the warrens,” Kayan said, slamming the book shut. “And who did you know who could read? Only templars and nobles are permitted to read.”

For the first time in his life, Jedra suddenly felt ashamed of his past. Sleeping in an alley, scavenging for food, living day to day with no hope for the future—he’d never even *seen* a book until he was nine. Now he realized how that must look from Kayan’s viewpoint, and how she must resent having somebody like him be able to do something she couldn’t do. *Not with Jedra*, she’d said when Kitarak had asked if she’d ever felt inadequate before. At the time it had sounded as if she’d been frustrated because she loved him, but now he realized there was another interpretation.

He could hardly believe it, especially after all they had gone through together. And the mindlink—would she merge with him if she felt that way? Not to mention the other things they had done?

Sure she would. He may not have seen a book until he was nine, but he had seen plenty of things in his years on the streets.

He looked at Kayan, her face set in a scowl, and said, “One of the people I knew who could read was a noblewoman. She used to come to the market. Blonde. Slender. You could hear necks cracking all around wherever she went. She was married to one of the richest landowners in Urik, probably had a hundred personal slaves with perfect bodies who would have done anything she asked them to—but she took an interest in a friend of mine. He was an elven water vendor with a patch over one eye and a knife scar like a bandolier across his chest. Missing a few fingers, too.

That didn't matter to Rowenda. She used to dress up in disguise—I doubt it fooled anybody but her, but once a week or so she'd put on a tattered cloak and wear a veil and come spend a half dour with Merick in the back of his tent."

Kayan said, "Is there a point to this tender reminiscence?"

Nodding slowly, Jedra said, "She got some kind of thrill out of it. Merick did, too, but he didn't realize what was going on. He thought she really cared for him, right up to the day she grew tired of him and had him hauled off to the slave pens."

Kayan squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, they seemed to glisten with fire. "You think I'm slumming, is that it?"

"It doesn't matter what I think," Jedra said. "The important thing is whether or not you think you're slumming."

She didn't respond for a long time, merely let the book thump to the floor and lay back on the cushion, one hand over her eyes. After a long moment in which the only noise was the faint whistling of the wind flowing around the outside of the camouflaged house, she said, "I don't need this right now. Not on top of everything else."

"I don't either," said Jedra, "but something isn't right between us, and it's driving me nuts. At first I thought it was just jealousy because I could do telekinesis and you couldn't, but now I don't know. Jealousy I can handle, but if you think I'm not good enough for you, if I'm eventually going to be rejected because I can't read or I've got bad table manners or something, then I don't see any point in prolonging the agony."

She raised her hand off her eyes. "Jedra, you don't know what you're talking about."

"I hope I don't," he said, but his stomach felt tied in knots. She hadn't denied what he'd said.

Unwilling to push it any further, he left her alone with her book. Kitarak was in his workshop, building some unfathomable piece of tinkercraft, so Jedra went back to his and Kayan's room and sat cross-legged on the cushion there. He tried to clear his mind and just relax for a

few minutes, but the harder he tried, the more frustrated he became. He couldn't shake the feeling that someone was in the room with him. He wondered if Kayan or Kitarak were trying to read his mind, but he knew from experience what that felt like, and this wasn't the same. This was something else, something less directed, something...

Something in the knapsack he had carried with him all through the desert. He levitated it off the hook by the door and brought it to his lap, where he opened it up to find the crystals he had taken from the ruined city.

He had forgotten all about them in the turmoil of fatigue and emotion since he had arrived here. The one he wore on the thong around his neck had become such a familiar companion that he no longer noticed it, but now he took the other two—the ones with the strange presence to them—out of the pack and held them in his hand. He concentrated on them, trying to sense what kind of energy they might contain that made them register like living beings, but they didn't respond to his mental probes. He tried every method Kitarak had taught him, but nothing told him any more than he already knew.

He stood up and carried the crystals through the kitchen into the workshop, where he found Kitarak bent over a tiny geared device of some sort. The tohr-kreen looked up when he entered. "Yes?"

"I just remembered these crystals," Jedra said, extending his hand. "They've got some odd kind of presence to them, but I can't figure out what. I thought maybe you could."

Kitarak glanced at them. "Ah, those. I told you before, they're probably just magical talismans. Either that or they're empowered gems used for storing psionic energy." He clicked his mouth in laughter. "Given what you and Kayan are capable of together, you certainly don't need anything like that." He turned back to the device on his workbench. "Look here!" he said proudly. "I have nearly repaired this clock. I need only make one more gear, and I believe it will run."

Kitarak obviously wasn't interested in Jedra's crystals. Jedra looked at the tohr-kreen's tiny nest of overlapping wheels with the same lack of

enthusiasm. He couldn't imagine how it could do anything, much less run anywhere, but he would take Kitarak's word for it.

"Nice," he said, then went back to his own room.

Power-storage crystals, eh? He tried tapping into one, imagining its energy flowing into him, but nothing happened. Maybe it was more like a mindlink. He tried that, and this time he got a glimmer of contact. It felt as though there might actually be something to link with, as if there were more than simple energy inside. He tried a little harder, pushing for linkage...

Hey! Kayan's angry shout startled him out of contact. *What do you think you're doing?* she demanded.

Trying to mindlink with one of these crystals, he said.

Sure you are, she said, acrimony oozing from her voice. *You're trying to force yourself on me. Well, where I come from, that's called mindrape. And the next time you try it, I'll squish your filthy intrusive brain out through your ears, you got it?*

Kayan, that's not what I—

Stay out of my head!

Sudden pain flared in Jedra's skull. He clutched his head and rocked backward in agony, then Kitarak's training took hold and he shielded his mind from her attack.

A thump and a crash sounded from the workshop, then Kitarak stomped into the great room. "What is going on here?" he bellowed, his voice amplified psionically until it rattled the stones in the roof.

Jedra leaned out through the doorway. "I, uh, I was trying to link with those crystals, but I evidently slipped and pushed myself on Kayan instead." She stuck her head out from the library, and he told her, "Really, Kayan, that's what happened."

"Sure."

Kitarak looked at Jedra, then at her. "You made me ruin the gear I was making," he told her.

She hung her head. "I'm sorry."

“You should be.” Kitarak rasped his arms against his sides loud enough to make Jedra and Kayan wince. “You two have the worst control of anybody I’ve ever had the misfortune to tutor. Jedra, your attempt to mindlink—whether aimed at Kayan or not—was the clumsiest I’ve felt since I stepped on a baby tembo. No wonder she blasted you. I was just about to do it myself. But you”—he looked back at Kayan—“your unfocused tantrum was even worse. It had all the subtlety of a detonation spell. I am ashamed to call you students if this is the way you use my teaching.”

“I’m sorry,” Kayan said again.

“Me, too,” said Jedra, nearly writhing with embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to bother anybody.”

“Well, you did,” said Kitarak. “And so did you,” he said to Kayan. He rasped his arms again, then stepped farther into the room. “Sit down,” he said, gesturing at the cushions. “Join your minds. I will teach you control or die in the attempt.”

Kayan lingered in the doorway. “I don’t think I—”

“Sit down!” Kitarak’s voice jerked her into action, and she practically leaped for the cushions. Jedra didn’t wait to be told a second time.

“Converge,” Kitarak told them.

Jedra looked at Kayan. Her eyes smoldered with pure hatred. All the same, Jedra felt the familiar tingling in his mind that signaled her presence, so he closed his eyes on her physical form and let his mind touch hers.

They linked, but their agitation kept them from merging completely. *I’m really sorry*, Jedra said as soon as he realized he hadn’t lost his identity in the union this time.

I bet, she replied.

Kitarak’s mind joined them, a cold, dark, alien presence even less comforting than their own uneasy intellects. *Calm yourselves*, he said. *We will start with a simple probe. Both of you, see if you can find what I’m visualizing.* Kitarak’s presence winked out as completely as if he had never existed. He had shielded himself.

Kayan? Jedra asked.

What?

I really wasn't trying to—

Drop it. Kitarak's waiting. Are you going to try to break through his shield, or are you going to just sit there whining?

Damn it, I'm trying to apologize!

I don't want your apology. I don't want anything from you, understand?

The emotions boiling through the link hurt far more than her words. Jedra felt her contempt for him like a physical wound in his guts. Worse, he felt her own pain and knew he had caused it. He had hurt her deeply with his foolish remark about slumming.

She turned her attention to Kitarak, but Jedra stopped her. It was almost instinctive, the way he wrenched her mind back into contact with his. *Look, he said, forget him for a minute. Probeme. Then you'll see what I really feel. It's not what you think at all.*

He shouldn't have forced her, not so soon after his earlier disaster trying to establish contact with the crystals. *Get away from me!* she snarled, and she lashed out at him with her mind.

Jedra suddenly found himself in complete panic. His heart pounded as if it would tear itself free from his chest, and he felt certain that horrible, agonizing death would come in the next instant. He tried to shield himself from it, but Kayan's attack swept through his mental barrier as if it weren't even there. She had become the avenging angel of death, come to torture him until he cried out for death as sweet release.

He tried to flee, but in convergence his body was only an abstraction, and wherever he could go mentally she could easily follow. His panic mounted, drowning out rational thought and leaving only the animal core of his being to act instinctively against the threat.

He felt energy surging back through the mindlink, a wave of raw power directed at the source of his panic. Still linked, he felt it strike Kayan and blast into her unshielded mind like a sandstorm through a tent, ripping her

consciousness to tatters and scattering it to the winds. He felt her scream in terror, felt her strike back in her own last-ditch effort, and...

...and nothing. Their linked minds suddenly stopped feeling anything, stopped sending or receiving or even thinking. They existed as two separate points of view suspended in nothingness.

Then time started again, and Kitarak's voice said, *That is enough*. Jedra felt the mindlink break, and he found himself back in the tohr-kreen's great room, shivering with muscle spasms and soaked in sweat.

Kayan looked pale as a zombie. Jedra panicked all over again, afraid he had killed her, but she finally took a deep, shuddering breath and opened her eyes.

Kitarak didn't seem to care about their physical condition. "You disgrace me," he said as soon as they could hear him. "Both of you. You ignore your lessons, preferring to battle instead, and when you do you nearly kill one another. If I hadn't suppressed your abilities, you *would* have killed one another. What were you thinking?"

Jedra clenched his muscles to stop them from shivering. "I wanted to show her that I hadn't meant anything before, but when I tried she hit me with—I don't know what she did, but I suddenly felt like I had to escape, and since I couldn't do that, I struck back."

Kayan neither denied nor agreed with his explanation. She just closed her eyes and took deep breaths.

"I see," Kitarak said. "You wanted to show her that you meant no harm, so the first thing you did when she took offense was try to kill her."

"No!" said Jedra. "I didn't mean to hurt anybody; I just panicked."

"And you?" Kitarak asked Kayan. "Do you have an equally miserable excuse for your behavior?"

"He grabbed me," she said. "I told him to leave me alone and he didn't listen."

Kitarak looked up at the roof. "Dragons forbid that Jedra not obey your every whim," he said. When neither of them replied, he looked back down and growled, "Argh. This is pointless. You've got *me* doing it now."

He got up and walked into his workshop. They heard rattling and sliding sounds from within, and Kitarak said through the doorway, "That is probably appropriate, since I no doubt share the blame. I have been driving you too hard."

His sudden turnabout left Jedra speechless.

Kitarak said, "The rigors of psionic study have been too stressful for you, particularly since you need to develop your personal bond better in order to use it. I was foolish not to see that before now." He emerged from the workshop with his backpack, into which he stuffed a handful of books that floated out from the library and a few cooking items that did the same from the kitchen.

"What's that for?" Kayan asked.

"I am giving you a vacation," Kitarak said. "Your psionics training is suspended until you solve your personal problems and become true clutch-mates."

"You're leaving?"

Kitarak tied closed the top of his pack. "Your powers of deduction are truly amazing," he told her. To both of them he said, "You may call for me to return when you are ready to continue your education, but you had better be truly ready. In the meantime, you will find food enough in the pantry to keep you for months, if you are frugal with it. Jedra, you must remember to keep the cold-box from warming up, and Kayan, you must prevent the vegetables from spoiling."

Jedra hardly heard him. The cold-box and the vegetables could vanish in a puff of smoke for all he cared.

Kitarak couldn't leave! Not now, when Kayan was mad at him.

But Kitarak could leave, and he did, dragging his pack to the door and pausing there only long enough to say, "By the way, I was visualizing a rain cloud." Then he hoisted his pack onto his back and stepped outside, closing the door solidly behind him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The silence in the great room was thick enough to slice into wedges. Jedra looked at Kayan, and she looked at him, but neither of them wanted to start the accusations they both knew were coming. A gust of wind rattled one of the skylights, and Jedra reached up telekinetically through the roof and rearranged the rocks holding the glass shell in place, the motion dislodging a pinch of grit that pattered on the cushion between him and Kayan.

She seemed to know what he was doing even though he hadn't looked up. "Yes, show off, why don't you," she said.

He shook his head. "I was trying to save the skylight."

"Like you were trying to mindlink with a *crystal*?"

"Yes! Yes, I was. Here, see for yourself." He nearly levitated one of the crystals from the bedroom, but then he thought better of that and got up to get it himself. Both of them were right where he'd dropped them on the cushion; he picked up one and brought it back out to the great room.

"See?" he said, holding it out to Kayan. "There's something strange about this. I can sense some kind of energy in it, almost as if it's alive. I was trying to mind-link with it when you got mad at me."

She hardly looked at the crystal. "So it's my fault, is that what you're saying?"

"What?" Jedra sat down across from her again.

"You were just minding your own business when I blew up at you. So it's my fault that we fought, and that Kitarak left. That's what you think, isn't it?"

Jedra looked down at the crystal. "Well, I was *trying* to mind my own business, but I guess I was probably thinking about you, too, so that's why I accidentally mind-linked with you instead."

“Accidentally. Hah. Never mind that you came into the library looking for some mental action, and when I was busy you accused me of slumming, or that—”

“You’re the one who called me a warren rat.”

“I did not.”

“You did, too. You said ‘your kind of people’ like we were some kind of filth on the bottom of your sandals.”

Kayan stared at him, her nostrils flaring with each breath. Without a word, she stood up and went into the bedroom, emerged with her knapsack, and went into the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” Jedra asked, following her to the kitchen door.

She had gone into the pantry and was stuffing vegetables and dried meat into her pack.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she asked. “I’m leaving.”

“What makes you think Kitarak will take you with him?”

She looked up at Jedra as if he’d just spoken a foreign language. “Who said anything about Kitarak? I’m leaving by myself. The two of you can do whatever you want when I’m gone. Rearrange the furniture with your stupid telekinesis—I don’t care.”

Even without the mindlink, Jedra could tell she meant it. She really intended to strike out on her own.

“Uh, Kayan,” he said. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea. We had a hard enough time crossing the desert *together*?”

She came back out of the pantry, her pack bulging with food. “Oh, so now I’m helpless, too? What do you think I did all this time we were here, ignore everything Kitarak said? I may not be able to move things around the way you can, but I did learn a thing or two. I can take care of myself.” She filled her waterskin from the jug they kept on the counter, then pushed past Jedra into the great room and crossed into the bedroom, where she packed her clothes. She didn’t have much; besides the tunic she was wearing she had just the elven robe and the shirt and short pants she’d made.

Jedra followed her and stood in the doorway while she tucked them into her knapsack around the food. “You can’t make it alone through the desert and you know it,” he said. “Who’s going to stand watch when you get exhausted? And what will you do if another tokamak finds you?”

“I’ll hit it with the same thing I did to you,” Kayan said. “The same thing I did to Sahalik. Very useful for driving off unwanted advances.”

The fear he’d felt just a few minutes ago had been the same thing she’d done to Sahalik? No wonder the elf had run away. If Kitarak hadn’t blocked it before the fear had had a chance to burn into Jedra’s memory, he would probably be running away himself, instead of Kayan.

“What are you afraid of?” he asked her suddenly.

“Huh?” She tied her pack closed.

“Why are you so eager to run off into the desert? Just because we had an argument? Because Kitarak left? Or are you afraid of me?”

She pushed past him into the great room again. “I’m not afraid of you or anybody else,” she said. She pulled on her pack and pushed open the door. Wind swirled inside, carrying a cloud of fine sand with it. The evening light outside was dirty red, filtered through all the airborne sand.

“It’s going to be dark soon, and there’s a storm blowing up,” Jedra told her. “You ought to at least be afraid of that.”

She looked out into the blowing sand, but if it scared her, she didn’t show it. When she looked back at Jedra, her expression was hard as stone. “Good-bye,” she said, then she stepped through the door and closed it behind her.

Jedra wanted to go after her, to bring her back and make her listen to him, but he knew she wouldn’t let him. He thought about mindspeaking an apology to her, but she probably wouldn’t listen to that, either. The only thing he could do for her was watch over her psionically, and get ready to go to her rescue if she needed it.

The storm saved him the trouble. His disembodied mind hovering over her every step of the way, he watched her climb out of the canyon, but she had hardly made it up the switchbacks before the wind hit with gale force.

Billowing clouds of sand made it nearly impossible to breathe, much less find the trail. Kayan tried it anyway, probably using her psionic vision to see through the blinding sand, but even so she only made it a quarter mile or so beyond the rim of the canyon before she turned around and headed back.

Jedra let her fight her way to the switchbacks again, then when he was sure she was committed to returning he used his newly learned skill to calm the wind immediately around her while she trudged dispiritedly back to Kitarak's stronghold.

He met her at the door.

"Aren't you going to say 'I told you so'?" she asked when he opened it for her.

"How about 'I'm sorry' instead?" He took her pack from her and brushed off the sand that had blown into the seams.

She looked at him incredulously. "You're sorry? For what?"

"For making you mad. And for making you think I was mad at you."

"Oh, now you weren't even mad at me. Tell me another one." She grabbed her pack from him and took it into the library. There wasn't a door to slam, but the rejection was just as intense as if there had been.

Oh, but she was hard to convince. As Jedra stared after her, his apology ignored, he wondered why he even bothered to try. He went back to their bedroom—now his own, he supposed—and lay back on the cushion. The wind howled overhead, whistling through the rocks that camouflaged the house, and Jedra wondered where Kitarak might be. Had he found shelter somewhere, or was he wandering blindly through the storm?

He closed his eyes and let his mind drift outward again. The blowing sand was only a shadow of motion in the psionic vision, easily ignored, so he concentrated on finding the dark whirlwind that signaled an intelligent mind. He searched all around the canyon, spiraling outward until he'd gone a dozen miles, but Kitarak was nowhere to be seen. Jedra tried straight mindsending, but he got no response that way, either.

Finally he got up and walked across the house to the library. Kayan was curled up on the cushion, not reading or sleeping, but just staring at the murky red light beyond the room's single irregular window. Night was not far away.

"What do you want?" she demanded when she heard him behind her.

"I want your help finding Kitarak. He's out in this storm because of us, and I want to make sure he's all right."

She sat up to look at him. "Oh, you do. And how do you propose doing that? By mind-merging?"

He nodded. "Unless you can find him on your own. I tried it and couldn't."

She blinked a couple of times, then said, "So did I."

He stepped into the library and said, "Then let's put aside our troubles for a few minutes and try it together. He may need help."

"Not likely," Kayan said. After a moment she added, "But it's possible." She nodded. "All right, sit down and let's try it. But if you—"

"I won't."

Jedra sat down beside her, his legs folded beneath him and his arms at his sides, and closed his eyes. He heard Kayan shift slightly beside him, then suddenly she was there *with* him. They still weren't a single mind, but it was better than the last time. Kayan's hostility had lost some of its edge, and his own sense of inadequacy had faded somewhat.

Let's go, she said, and they moved out into the storm. Kitarak had taught them how to control their movement better than before; when they imagined themselves as a bird they didn't have to imagine the limitations as well. They could have more eyes than usual, larger wingspan, longer talons—whatever they needed to see or reach what they wanted. As long as they could imagine something, they could have it, so long as one or the other of them had the power to make it happen.

This time, however, they became a two-headed dragon. Their long, snakelike necks coiled back in surprise, and the scaly wings beat frantically just to keep them airborne. Problem was, they didn't beat in time. The

dragon careened left and right through the sky while Jedra and Kayan fought for control.

Let me do it! Jedra said frantically as he tried to keep them from crashing into the rock house. He had no idea whether or not they could accidentally crush themselves, but he didn't want to find out the hard way.

How come you have to control everything? Kayan demanded. *Why can't I do something for a change?* The dragon's wings flapped a couple of times under her control, propelling them up over the canyon rim.

All right, then, you do it, Jedra said, surrendering the wings to her. He concentrated on scanning the ground for signs of Kitarak, but there was no evidence of his psionic presence.

He must be blocking us, Jedra said. *Let's see if we can spot him visually.* They flew the same search pattern Jedra had done alone, but finding a sandy yellow tohr-kreen in the rocky desert was nearly impossible even for two mind-merged psionics. If they could truly *merge*, maybe, but not the way they were.

This is pointless, he said after they had covered the entire area for miles around. *He obviously doesn't want to be found, so we might as well leave him alone. He'll contact us if he needs help.*

You're right, Kayan said.

With her words, the dragon's long necks merged together for the lower half of their length. Their heads were still separate, but not as separate as they had been.

Did you do that? Kayan asked.

I think we did that, Jedra replied, and the neck fused another foot or so.

Kayan's scaly, bone-ridged dragon head turned to examine Jedra's. Jedra looked into her slitted yellow eyes, trying to guess what she was thinking, but he saw only his own reflection in their shiny depths.

The neck fused another few inches, drawing their heads even closer together.

What's happening? Kayan asked. She forgot to flap their wings, and the dragon began to fall. Jedra reached out to flap them just as she did, and this

time they kept their body airborne together.

Now their heads were only a foot or so apart. And now that they were this close, Jedra felt the lure of true convergence like a physical force drawing him even closer.

I think we're going to merge whether we want to or not, Jedra said. *Do you want to break the link first?*

Kayan evidently felt the allure, too. *Do you?* she asked.

Not really, Jedra said, and then it was too late.

They became one. They felt power flowing through them again, felt their squabbles fade into obscurity. Neither of them cared about their previous argument; there was no “neither” to care. They were one being again, one mind.

The dragon swooped, banked, and rose on suddenly coordinated wings. They bellowed their mastery into the sky and heard it echo off the canyon walls, and spit a twenty-foot tongue of flame that lit up the twilight like day.

How could we ever give this up? they thought as they arrowed through the sky with smooth strokes of their wings. The dragon was the most feared beast in all of Athas, yet here they were wearing the body and feeling the ripple of powerful muscles all along its length. They didn't care that it was an illusion; *it felt* real, and it felt wonderful.

They flew until well after dark, when maintaining their flight and their enhanced vision began to tire them. They spiraled down out of the sky toward Kitarak's stone house, but even when they drew near, they hesitated to break the link.

Withdrawing was going to hurt. They'd had enough experience at it to know that they wouldn't carry their feelings of goodwill out of the mindlink; in fact, the post-link depression would only make things worse.

Then let's not do it, they thought. *We can stay linked indefinitely if we don't exert any major psionic powers.*

That meant losing the dragon body. They let it dissipate and drifted back into the house. The link became more tenuous and threatened to dissolve into two points of view again, but Jedra regained enough control

over his body to reach out and take Kayan's hand, and the link intensified again.

It was dark within the library. Together they lit a candle by agitating the wick into flame, and this time instead of resenting it, the Kayan part of their combined intellect exulted in the ability. By the candle's light they picked up a book and read, giving Jedra the same thrill.

The book was the same medical volume that Kayan had been reading earlier, but now the squiggles made sense—sort of. They read: *It is believed that ancient physicians knew the sites in the brain responsible for speech, hearing, voluntary motion, involuntary motion, and other everyday activities. Even sites for abilities such as calculation and puzzle-solving were rumored to be known, and one researcher claims to have discovered the seat of personality. Whether this is true has never been determined, as all records were lost in the cataclysm.*

It is boring! Jedra said, momentarily weakening the link.

No, it's not! Kayan replied, then she laughed. *Well, all right, so maybe it is.*

Hey, Jedra thought, let's try those cry stab now. With both of us trying, we could probably figure out how to tap into their energy. Maybe it will let us stay linked longer.

Well... all right.

The link intensified again, and together they floated one of the crystals out of the bedroom into the library, where they placed it on the floor in front of them. It reflected candlelight from its faceted sides, but their psionic vision saw a brighter glow from within.

They focused their attention on it, trying to make contact with whatever energy it contained. They could sense something there, but it didn't feel like anything they had encountered before. This was a little like a mind, but not enough like one to reach with a mindlink. It felt something like Kitarak when he put up a mental barrier—alien and hard to touch—so they tried one of the techniques he had taught them for penetrating such defenses. It was

the same power Kayan had thought Jedra was using on her the first time he'd tried it, the deliberate thrusting of one's mind upon another.

The crystal barrier couldn't hold against Jedra and Kayan's synergistic power. There was a moment of resistance, then a sensation of vertigo as they burst through...

...into a bright, sunlit, grassy meadow surrounded by trees. They blinked their eyes against the glare, and Jedra sneezed. When he opened his eyes again, squinting, he saw Kayan standing beside him, one hand held like a visor over her eyes to protect them from the sun. The other still held on to Jedra's hand. They had fallen out of mindlink.

But he felt none of the letdown they normally felt. In fact, he felt the same consuming energy coursing through him, as if they were still linked even though they now stood side by side, separate viewpoints in separate bodies.

What in the world? How did we get here? he asked her. *Where's here?* she replied.

He looked for anything familiar. The sun was the wrong color: bright yellow, almost white, and though it was far brighter than Athas's coppery red cinder, it provided more light than heat. The air actually felt cool against his skin. The grass at their feet—ankle-high and soft as feathers—almost glowed with an intense green color that Jedra had never seen before. The leaves on the trees were equally green, and their bark was eye-jarringly white with black streaks in it. And overhead, the sky had creases in it, as if it were made of angled panes of smooth glass.

We're inside the crystal, Jedra said wonderingly. *It's not just a power source, it's a place.*

A beautiful one, too, said Kayan. *Bright, though.* She turned half around, looking at the trees surrounding them. *Let's go stand in the shade.*

Good idea. They walked side by side, their feet swishing through the grass with each step. Jedra had never seen so much greenery in all his life. He had heard that the king's gardens were something like this, but here

there was no wall to keep the rabble out. There was no rabble, either. Only green growing things as far as he could see.

What's a place like this doing inside a crystal? he asked when they reached the cool shade beneath the trees.

I don't know. It's your crystal. Kayan laughed, a bright, clear sound in the clean, fresh air.

"I didn't make it," Jedra said aloud. "I just found it in the ancient city."

"I wonder if we'll see ourselves looking in when the sun goes down?" Kayan said, peering out at the angular sky again.

"That would be strange."

She laughed again. "This is already strange." Jedra looked deeper into the forest. It wasn't dense; the trees stood just close enough to provide not-quite-continuous shade for someone walking beneath them. A few hundred yards beyond, he saw a glimmer of motion between the trunks, something even whiter than their bark.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing.

It wavered, like a piece of cloth flapping in the wind. Kayan said, "I don't know. Want to go see?"

"Of course."

They walked through the trees, stopping again and again to marvel at new wonders: birds chirping merrily in the branches, fat, furry animals waddling through the grass, even dewdrops caught at the base of wide leaves where they curled around their stems. Something seemed odd about them all. It took Jedra a moment to come up with what it was, but he finally figured it out.

"They have no defenses," he said. "None of the plants have thorns, and as slow as they move you could just reach out and grab one of those furry things for dinner."

"That's true." Kayan shrugged. "We may have to try it in a little while. I didn't eat after I got back from my little outing in the sandstorm."

Jedra laughed. “If I’d known what we would find in here, I would have packed a lunch.”

They walked on, but the next tree they came to was different. Its leaves were smaller than the others, almost an afterthought, and round, light-tan balls hung from the branches. The aroma of baking bread permeated the air.

“Look at this!” Kayan said incredulously, reaching up and pulling loose one of the balls.

“What is it?”

“It’s a roll.” Kayan handed it to Jedra. It was an oval oblong, lightly browned on top, with a faint indentation in the center where the stem had been. It was warm, as if it had just come out of an oven. And the aroma... Jedra’s mouth watered, and his stomach growled.

“This is impossible,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” said Kayan. “But then so is this whole place.” She reached up and plucked another roll from the tree. When she tore it open and exposed the fluffy white interior, the baked-bread smell grew even stronger. She narrowed her brows for a moment, concentrating on it, then she took a cautious nibble, smiled, and took a bigger bite. “Mmm. Great.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Jedra asked.

“I couldn’t detect any poisons,” she said.

That wasn’t one of his skills, but Jedra tried anyway. If they were still linked somehow, then he would be able to. Come to think of it, this would be a good test. He concentrated, trying to see any poisons as black stains in the bread, but the roll remained its natural brown and white. That didn’t necessarily mean anything, though. As Kitarak had said when he showed them this skill, “Absence of evidence isn’t evidence of absence.”

So Jedra looked again for something he knew was there, like yeast, and this time the roll turned gray.

“Hey, it works!” he said. “I can scan for poison.”

“Really? Then maybe I can...” Her roll rose up off her hand and floated before her. “Yes! I can levitate things!” She snatched the roll out of the air and took another bite.

Jedra bit into his own and closed his eyes to savor the wonderful flavor. It was slightly sweet and nearly melted in his mouth. He hadn't tasted anything this good in all his life. He wolfed down the first roll and picked two more. Kayan did the same, and they continued their walk through the trees, munching the miracle bread.

A rushing sound had been growing steadily stronger as they walked deeper into the forest. When they grew closer to the moving white thing—it looked more like a long banner waving back and forth in the breeze now that they could see more of its length—he realized that the sound came from the same source. Something *was* moving across the ground. Something long and sinuous. Bits of it splashed upward, glittering in the sunlight. “No,” Jedra said, stepping closer. “Impossible.” But it was no more impossible than bread growing on trees. There before him, as real as anything else in this bizarre world inside the crystal, flowed a stream of open water.

It was about as wide as he was tall, and it poured down from right to left over a bed of rocks. It pooled up in a few places before spilling over, and when Jedra walked up to the edge of one of the pools he saw flashes of silver in the water.

“Did you see that?” he asked. “Something’s alive in there.”

“Fish!” Kayan exclaimed. “I’ve heard about them. They still exist in the hinterlands, I’ve been told.”

Jedra reached down and stuck his hand in the water. It was cold, almost as cold as the frozen meat in Kitarak’s cold-box. “Wow!” he said, jerking his hand back. It was just the shock that had startled him, though; the water actually felt kind of nice against his skin. He cupped his hand and dipped it in again, then brought it up to his lips to drink.

It was the coldest, freshest, cleanest water he had ever tasted. Jedra scooped up a double handful and drank it all.

Kayan bent down to try it, but she stopped when she saw her reflection in the water. “What the—?” She reached out to touch the image, then withdrew her hand when it broke into ripples.

“What’s the matter?” Jedra asked.

“That’s not what I look like,” Kayan said. “Well, it is, but my nose is bigger than that, and my hair isn’t that long, and—”

“You look great.”

“I know I look great. I mean, if that’s really what I look like.” Kayan nodded to the water, which had returned to its mirror smoothness. “But I never looked like that before.”

“Sure you did,” Jedra said. “You’ve always been pretty.” But now that she mentioned it, her nose *was* smaller, and her hair *was* longer than before. And her eyes were an even brighter green than before, too. He hadn’t noticed it until now because he had always thought of her as beautiful.

Her tunic had changed, too. The cloth was finer, and it fit her body better. The neckline plunged lower than before, showing much more of her sensuous curves than she usually exposed by daylight, and it was shorter as well, allowing her slender legs more freedom to distract Jedra’s gaze.

Curious, he looked down at his own clothing. He had put on a tunic similar to Kayan’s this morning, but now his was tighter, too, tied at the waist with a silky cord. It was made of soft brown leather and had no sleeves, exposing his tanned and muscular arms all the way to the shoulders, which were broader than he remembered.

He looked into the water. The face that stared back at him looked a little like his, but Jedra felt the same disorientation Kayan must have, for it seemed much more handsome than he’d ever thought it before. His cheekbones were higher, more elfin than he’d remembered them, his mouth was wider with fuller lips, and his jaw was more rounded than before. And his sandy blond hair, normally unkempt, now looked merely tousled in a dashing sort of way.

“Wow,” he said. “I’m different, too.”

She looked at him for a moment. “Now that I think about it you *are* a little more handsome than usual today. But you’re always handsome,” she hastily added.

“Even when you’re mad at me?”

“Oh, especially then,” she said, blushing. She looked at her own reflection again. “This is wild. How could we suddenly become more beautiful?”

“The same way we found bread growing on trees and water running free right across the ground.” Jedra held out his arms to encompass the whole forest, and he laughed. “This is evidently some ancient paradise. People must have come here to play in a perfect world.”

Kayan bent down to take a drink from the pool. “Perfect is right,” she said. “This place is incredible.”

“And now we have it all to ourselves.” Jedra held out his hand. “Come on, let’s see what else the ancients did for fun.”

* * *

The stream led down out of the forested mountains, new tributaries adding to its volume until it became a rushing torrent. Jedra and Kayan followed along its grassy banks, scaring up butterflies and birds as they swished through the tall stalks. The noise of rushing water made talk difficult, and the crystal clarity of mind-speaking was too jarring a contrast against the rich depth of sound around them, so they merely walked hand in hand and enjoyed the play of light and shadow amid more greenery than they had ever seen before in their lives.

Then, as they rounded a sharp bend in the river, they heard an even louder roar ahead of them. The water seemed to disappear into the ground just a little way in front of them, but when they drew closer they realized that it fell over a cliff. Cautiously, they stepped up to the edge and looked over. The river fell free for over a hundred feet, spray blowing away from it as it fell, then it thundered into a wide circular pool surrounded by rocks and trees.

Jedra looked out over the treetops and nearly fell off the cliff, for about halfway to the horizon stood a city, its buildings shining bright white in the sunlight, and beyond the city was more water than he had ever believed

existed. It stretched from the sandy slopes beyond the city all the way to the horizon, and from left to right as far as they could see before cliffs and forest blocked their view.

What is that? Jedra asked.

I think it's the ocean. Kayan teetered forward, and Jedra pulled her back a few steps from the cliff edge. The view out there was too hypnotic.

What's the ocean?

It's where all the water goes when there's more than people can use it. The Sea of Silt used to be an ocean before the cataclysm, or so I've been told.

The Sea of Silt was a deep basin full of dust many miles to the east of most of the inhabited land of Athas. Jedra tried to imagine it full of water instead, and decided that it might indeed have looked something like this.

They watched waves slide toward the beach, grow taller as they approached, then curl over and splash into white foam and coast to a stop on the flat sand.

The roar of the waterfall at their feet kept them from hearing the waves. Jedra heard *something*, though. Puzzled, he turned his head, just in time to see a huge furry black beast advancing on them. It stood on four legs and had thick, shaggy hair that seemed to ripple as it moved. Its head was long and wide on a short neck, and multiforked horns stuck up from either side. It shook its head and bellowed again.

"Look out!" Jedra shouted.

"What?" Kayan couldn't hear him.

A monster! Jedra mindsent.

Kayan whirled around, just as the beast lowered its head and ran straight for them.

Jedra tried to halt its charge through sheer force of will, shoving it back psionically the way he might move any other object, but whatever effect he had on it was nothing compared to what it did to him. Before the creature's pointed antlers even came close, he felt his feet slip backward on the slick grass. His heart slammed in his chest, pumping pure terror when the grass

ended and he skidded out over the sheer drop. Time seemed to stop. He hung poised in the air for an instant, long enough to look straight into Kayan's eyes and see the horror there before he plummeted toward the ground.

He was going to miss the pool. He looked down, saw the sharp rocks at the water's edge rushing up at him, and knew he was dead. He couldn't watch, but he couldn't close his eyes either, so he looked back up at Kayan just in time to see her leap outward in a graceful dive, arms outstretched, her body silhouetted against the sky.

"No!" he screamed. Not her, too. If he could survive his own fall he could catch her, but not while he had nothing to push against.

Or did he? In desperation he imagined shoving against the ground with all his might, trying to slow his fall or at least push himself sideways into the pool, and at the same time he pushed upward on Kayan.

Impact never came. Jedra risked a look down and saw the jagged rocks, wet with spray and coated with moss, just a few feet below him. He looked up and saw Kayan hovering fifty feet above, caught in mid-dive with her arms still outstretched.

Then, without his willing it, she swooped away. *Hah, I can fly!* she mindsent as she arched her back and looped around in the air. Jedra was so startled he nearly forgot to hold himself up, but the cold touch of a mossy rock on his leg made him flinch away and leap upward again.

This was a trick Kitarak hadn't taught them. Jedra wasn't quite sure how he was doing it, but somehow just the thought of rising was all he needed to make it happen. He imagined looping around the way Kayan had just done, and with stomach-twisting speed he whirled around in midair.

Kayan flew down toward him, arced around just out of his reach, and said, *Bet you can't catch me!* Without waiting to see what he would do, she took off in a wide circle, just inside the trees surrounding the waterfall.

Jedra reached forward with his arms and imagined himself following her, and suddenly he leaped forward, the wind rushing past him, blowing his hair back and flapping his tunic around his thighs. *Slower!* he thought,

veering to miss a tree. He curved around, flying a tighter circle than Kayan in order to cut her off, but when she saw what he was doing she sped up and ducked around behind the rushing wall of water.

Jedra flew in behind her, suddenly shivering in the cold spray, but she was gone.

Up here, he heard in his mind, and he looked up to see her spiraling lazily upward around the falling river. He followed her and this time she waited for him, hovering at the top of the waterfall just beyond the drop-off, with over a hundred feet of air between them and the turbulent pool below.

He was almost afraid to touch her for fear the strange spell would break and they would once again plummet to their deaths, but when she reached for him he glided into her arms and they kissed.

Mmmm, Kayan mindsent, and Jedra echoed her. The thrill of defying death once again lent even more spice to their embrace.

Your hair is sparkling with mist, he told her.

So is—look! She pointed over his shoulder, and he turned his head to see the antlered beast that had chased them off the cliff, now munching placidly on the grass beside the river.

It's an herbivore? he asked incredulously. *I got chased off a cliff by an herbivore?*

What are you griping about? I jumped.

Jedra laughed. *I thought you jumped off because I did.*

Kayan looked at him with her head tilted to the side and a smile on her lips. *There are a lot of things I'd do for you, but I don't think jumping off a cliff is one of them.*

Oh. Well, how about showing me what you would do? He kissed her again, and she giggled.

Here? Now?

Anywhere, Jedra told her, kissing her again and again. *Anywhere, anytime.*

* * *

The bright yellow sun had moved across a quarter of the sky by the time they finally grew tired of flying. They had left the waterfall far behind and were now gliding gently down the long slope from the mountains toward the ocean. The forest had given way to open grassland, still peppered here and there with individual trees and clusters of wildflowers. There seemed to be no order to it; if anyone had planted any of this the gardener's hand had been concealed admirably.

From a hundred feet in the air the world seemed nearly silent. The ocean made a soft rushing sound, but it was so constant it was easy to forget the noise was even there. As they drew closer, though, it grew louder, and with it came a smell unlike any they had ever experienced before. It was a mix of wet sand, rotting vegetation, and exotic animals both living and dead.

A wave toppled over with a roar just as they landed. A gray-and-white sea bird cried out as it flew overhead, and a flock of smaller, long-legged birds ran back and forth right at the edge of the water. Jedra and Kayan stood in the sand and watched the constant motion for long minutes before either of them spoke.

"What are those birds doing?" Jedra finally asked.

"I think they're finding food," Kayan said. "See how they pick at the sand right at the edge of the water?"

Jedra's stomach growled. "I wish we could find some food," he said. "It's been a long time since we had those rolls."

"Yeah, I could use something more to eat. Something substantial." Kayan turned once around, scanning the beach. "Too bad there aren't any trees around," she said. "If there were, I bet we could coax one into giving us something else."

"Maybe we should fly back to the forest," Jedra suggested.

"Maybe. There must be something to eat here, though. The ancients wouldn't have flown back and forth every time they got hungry, would

they?”

Jedra thought about that for a minute. “No, you’re right, they would probably have food brought to them.”

Kayan said, “That would be great, but I think we’re the only people here.” She laughed. “That’s the perennial complaint of the rich—you can never find a slave when you need one.”

Jedra laughed with her, but he stopped abruptly when a wave broke with a louder than usual rush and a hard-shelled, eight-legged creature crawled forward out of the foam. It was only a couple feet across, and most of that was legs, but it also had two enormous claws in front which it held raised while it advanced toward Jedra and Kayan.

“What is it?” Kayan asked, backing away.

“It looks like some kind of bug. A *big* bug.” Jedra got ready to run, or even fly away if it looked like the creature would attack, but it merely crawled forward at a steady gait. It stopped about five feet from him, lowered its body to the sand and stretched its legs out, then it lowered its claws as well and stopped moving entirely.

Jedra heard a soft sizzling sound over the constant hiss of the waves, and a few seconds later he smelled a wonderful, buttery aroma of cooking food.

Kayan smelled it too. “Eewww, disgusting!” she said. “It’s cooking itself!”

“It is, isn’t it?” Jedra stepped closer, fascinated. The sea bug’s dark brown shell was turning red as it cooked. The creature was like nothing he’d ever seen before, but the aroma of its heated flesh made his mouth water. He was suddenly ravenous. “I wonder how you’re supposed to eat one of these?”

Kayan looked at him as if he’d just gone crazy. “You can’t be serious.”

He grinned. “Well, now that it’s gone to all the trouble to cook itself it would be kind of inhospitable to let it go to waste, wouldn’t it?”

“But—” Kayan stuttered for words. “But it was alive just a second ago! And it killed itself!”

“Yes, isn’t that amazing? I wonder how the ancients managed to breed a creature that could do that? It would have to have some kind of psionic heating power, but the moment it died, the power would stop, so there would have to be some way to keep it going afterward, and—”

“Jedra, it isn’t *amazing*, it’s disgusting.”

“It is?”

“It just committed suicide!”

He tried to see what she was getting at. “Well, yes, I guess it did. But it didn’t look like it suffered any.”

“That’s not the point! The point is, it killed itself for us. I can’t eat something that killed itself just so I could eat it.”

Jedra held his hand out over the sea bug’s corpse. It was now bright red, and too hot to touch, but it had stopped sizzling. “You’d rather kill it yourself?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Hmm. What makes that any better? When *you* do it, you’re eating something that didn’t want to die. At least this way we know the meal was its own idea.”

“It’s just—just—arrgh!” Kayan growled, turning away.

Jedra looked at the creature with his poison sense, but saw nothing dangerous. “Come on,” he said, “we’re hungry, and it’s food. Let’s argue about the moral implications later.” He took one of the segmented legs in his fingers, bent it backward until its hard outer shell broke, and pulled it apart. White, stringy meat stuck out the ragged end. Jedra wondered if it would be tough, but he’d eaten much worse in his life, so he blew on it to cool it a bit and took a bite.

The meat was soft and tender, buttery, and nearly melted in his mouth. “Oh, yeah,” he said around a mouthful. “Mmm.” When Kayan still didn’t move to try any, he couldn’t resist adding, “This is even better than halfling.”

“You’ve never eaten halfling.” She looked over her shoulder at him. “Have you?”

“Not knowingly, but a lot of what you buy in the market could come from anywhere.” Jedra cracked the leg open along its length to expose another big bite of steaming flesh. “Here,” he said, holding out the leg to her. “It really is good.”

Kayan eyed the leg as if it might eat *her*. “I’m not hungry,” she said.

Jedra shrugged. “Suit yourself. More for me.” He bit into the soft meat and ate heartily.

Kayan left him to his meal and walked down to the water. She slipped off her sandals and walked closer, letting a wave wash over her feet.

“Yeow!” She jumped back as if she’d been stung.

Jedra dropped the bug leg and ran toward her. “What happened?”

“It’s *cold*.”

“Oh.” He walked on down toward where she stood and bent over to run his hands through the receding water. It was cold enough to raise bumps along his arm. He cupped his hands and took a drink of it, but spit it back out. “Ugh, it’s salty, too.”

“What?”

“Taste it. It’s salty.” Jedra got a sudden idea and went back to the cooked water bug, broke off another leg, and brought it back to the edge of the ocean. He twisted open the leg and waited for the water to come back, then he bent down and dipped the creamy white meat in it. Now when he took a bite, it was perfectly seasoned.

“You’re doing that just to get me, aren’t you?” Kayan demanded.

“No,” said Jedra. “I’m really hungry. You should try some of this, too.”

“I can’t.”

She seemed sincere. Jedra lowered his arm. “Well, then, let’s find you something else.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we can find another bread tree.” Kayan was about to say something, but a deep rumbling noise drowned her out. “Was that thunder?” she asked when it faded.

Jedra looked out over the ocean, where a dark gray cloud had boiled up seemingly out of nowhere. “Well, if that cloud is any indication, it is,” he said. Thunderstorms were rare on Athas, but not impossible; Jedra had been in two of them over the course of his life, and he remembered both vividly.

Kayan looked up at the cloud in surprise. “Where did that come from?” she asked. “It wasn’t there a minute ago.”

“Let me guess,” Jedra said. “You were mad at me, right?”

She nodded.

“And somehow, this place picks up our thoughts and makes them real. So now the *world* is mad at me.”

Lightning forked down out of the cloud into the ocean, and a half minute later thunder rumbled again. The storm was approaching fast. Even so, Kayan said, “Come now, you can’t think an entire thunderstorm is directed at *you*.”

“I don’t think I’ll stick around to find out.” Jedra scanned the flat beach for shelter, but there wasn’t any. “Come on,” he said, and he jumped into the air.

Kayan apparently decided not to make a target of herself just to prove a point. She joined him, and they flew together back toward the forest. The storm was advancing faster, though, blotting out the unnaturally bright sun, and when the flashes and the booms came only a few seconds apart it became apparent that it was going to catch them. “We aren’t going to make it,” Kayan said.

“You’ve got a better idea?” Jedra asked.

“Yeah.” She pointed to their left, up the coastline “The city.”

Its tall spires had beckoned them all day, but there had been too many other wonders to investigate first. Now that the need for shelter had become foremost, however, this suddenly seemed like a good time to check it out. Jedra and Kayan banked around and raced up the coast, the thunderstorm flashing and booming along behind them.

“It’s definitely following us!” Jedra announced when he risked a look back.

Wind buffeted them as they flew headlong toward the towering buildings, and just as they reached the outskirts of the city the rain hit. Big, fat globules of cold water struck their faces and bare arms like gravel in a gale, drenching them almost instantly and nearly blinding them in the process. *Under there!* Jedra mindsent, grabbing Kayan's arm and diving toward a three-story rectangular building that had a deep colonnade around all four sides. They swooped in under its cover and landed behind one of the columns, then ran for the open doorway near the middle of the long side.

Lightning etched shadows of the entire row of columns into the inner wall, and thunder shook the ground in the same instant. Jedra and Kayan piled through the doorway just as another lightning bolt hit close enough to light up the inside of the building, revealing a double row of columns with statues interspersed between them.

This is the same building we were in with Kitarak in the ruined city, Jedra thought, picking himself up off the marble floor.

Another lightning flash confirmed it. The same columns flanked the wide center aisle, and the same statues, once smashed to rubble, now stood whole. Jedra reached out to one of them and touched its nose. Was this the one he had tossed casually into the pile of debris? Evidently the crystal world was modeled after the real city during its height. Lightning flashed again and again and thunder shook the building, but they were safe inside its massive stone walls. They waited out the storm just inside the door, wincing at the lightning and thunder and watching the rain spatter into puddles on the stone streets.

This is too much to believe, Jedra said after the worst of the storm had passed. *Rivers and oceans and thunderstorms all in one day.*

Has it been just a day? Kayan asked. *It seem longer.* She leaned her head against his chest. *I'm tired.*

You're just hungry, he said. *You didn't eat any of the sea creature. Let's find you something to eat, and I'll bet you'll feel better.*

Maybe, she said. *Why don't we just go back home for dinner?*

The rain was letting up now. Jedra led her back outside to the covered colonnade, saying, “Oh, we can’t leave yet. There’s so much to see! Have you noticed that this is the same city as the one where we met Kitarak?”

“No, I hadn’t.” Kayan looked out at the buildings up and down the street, some of them seven or eight stories high.

Jedra said, “It looks different because none of them have fallen down yet, but that one down there”—he pointed to one of the tall ones—“is the one we pushed over. And that means the courtyard with the fountain should be over there.” He shifted his arm to the right.

“What difference does that make?”

“There should be trees there,” he said. “And if we start wishing for it now, at least one of them should have food on it.”

“Not something that cooks itself, I hope,” Kayan said.

“Now that you’ve said not, I bet it won’t.”

They walked out into the last of the rain, enjoying the sharp stings of cold drops on their skin. They walked down the street half a block, crossed over and went through the gap between two tall buildings, and sure enough, there was the open courtyard with the fountain. And surrounding the fountain was a ring of trees, each one bearing a different kind of fruit.

“There you go,” Jedra said proudly. “Whatever you like, the crystal world provides.”

“How about warmth?” Kayan said. “I like rain, but it’s kind of cold.”

A moment later the clouds began to break up, and the unnaturally bright sun shone through again.

“Good enough?” Jedra asked.

“It’ll do,” Kayan said, but she was smiling again.

They strolled from tree to tree, sampling the exotic fruits. When they had eaten their fill, Kayan lay back in the soft green grass and said, “Nap time.”

Jedra felt a little tired, too. “That’s a good idea,” he said, lying down beside her. He cast about psionically for danger but didn’t detect anything,

so he folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes and listened to the gurgling fountain and the peep of birds in the trees until he fell asleep.

* * *

The sun was going down when he woke; it was the cold that had awakened him. Jedra sat up groggily and rubbed his eyes, then gently shook Kayan's shoulder.

"Time to get up," he said.

Kayan didn't stir.

"Come on," he said, shaking harder. "There's still plenty of city to explore." He didn't really feel like it—he mostly wanted to just go back to sleep—but he supposed they would perk up if they ate again.

Kayan still didn't move.

"Kayan?" Suddenly afraid, Jedra looked to see if she was breathing, and he relaxed a little when he saw her chest rise and fall. Her breaths were very shallow, though, and far apart.

Kayan, he mindsent. No response. He tried linking with her, but they had already been linked before they came into this world, and nothing more happened.

She couldn't have been poisoned; she had checked the food carefully before she ate any of it. So what was the problem?

Jedra wasn't doing so well, either. He felt faint, and his vision swirled as if someone had stirred the world with a spoon. A couple of deep breaths helped, but not for long; the moment he tried to stand, his eyes went dark and he fell back down.

Kayan! he mindsent again. "Kayan!" He knelt beside her and shook her shoulder, pinched her arm, even rugged her into a semi-upright position, but the effort nearly tumbled him into unconsciousness again.

They both fell back to the grass. Jedra tried to sit up again, but he couldn't manage even that. He tried to break their mental link with the

crystal, but there was none to break. Once they had burst through into this world, they had stayed without effort. It would probably take a similar effort to leave, but they were too exhausted now to do it.

The world swirled around him. Fighting disorientation, he tried again to mindlink with Kayan, attempting to cut through the mysterious lethargy with a burst of psionic power, but he couldn't feel her presence. He felt *something* out there, some flicker of response far away in the vast crystal world, but he couldn't maintain it for more than a second.

The effort drained him even further, but that in itself provided an idea. If trying to mindlink tired him, then breaking the existing link with Kayan might give him more energy.

He concentrated on the mind-shielding technique that Kitarak had taught him, the one for stopping unwanted psionic contact. Closing his eyes so the swirling world wouldn't distract him, he carefully built up a barrier. He felt the contact with Kayan growing weaker, stretching out until the link finally broke and with a final wave of vertigo he tumbled back to reality in Kitarak's library.

It was dark. The candles had all burned out and it was still night, or it was night once again. Jedra tried to see with psionic vision, but there wasn't enough light to amplify. He tried to levitate a candle from one of the other rooms, but he didn't have the energy for it. He had to crawl into the great room for a candle, light it with the last of his power, and bring it back to the library.

Kayan lay on the cushion, sprawled on her side as if she had tumbled there without any attempt to break her fall. Her face and arms and legs looked thin and angular, the skin draped in folds over her bones. She looked like one of the starving street beggars who were so far gone that nobody bothered to feed them anymore.

His own arms and legs were just as bad, but he didn't need to look at them to know the problem: He was starving.

"It wasn't real," he whispered. "None of it was real. Not even the food." And in the real world, he and Kayan had been mindlinked for at least

a day, burning energy at dozens of times their normal rate. It had had the same effect on them as going without food for weeks.

“Kayan,” he said, shaking her. *Kayan*.

She didn’t move, except to draw in another slow, shallow breath. He tried to mindlink with her again, but he couldn’t reach her. Her mind wasn’t there—it was still in the crystal. And now that he had broken their link she was completely out of reach.

CHAPTER EIGHT

His first impulse was to shatter the crystal and let her out, but he didn't know if that would work. It wasn't just a box holding her mind captive; it was an entire world. She might die in the cataclysm that would surely wrack it if he damaged the crystal. He didn't know if death in there would mean anything outside, but he didn't want to risk it. Not yet.

He looked at the crystal lying there on the floor in front of him. Such a tiny thing to hold such wonders—and to present such a trap. He was afraid to touch it now, for fear he would cause earthquakes inside. If he started another chain reaction of falling buildings, Kayan could be caught in it.

No, the first thing to do was to stave off starvation before *he* collapsed as well. He would be no use to her at all if he let that happen. He crawled into the kitchen and pulled himself up to reach the water jug on the counter, drank a long, sloppy draught from that, then he opened the easiest cabinet to reach—the grain bin—and sat down in front of it to munch a handful of the dry seeds. When that began to take effect he stirred enough to shuffle into the pantry and eat a sack of nuts and a raw erdlu egg, which in turn revived him enough to thaw one of the inix flanks from the cold-box and devour that half raw.

He took a water flask and an erdlu egg back into the library for Kayan, but without a conscious mind running her body he couldn't get her to take any of either. Finally he just dribbled a little water into her mouth and counted on reflex to make her swallow, and when she'd done that a couple of times he switched to the erdlu egg and kept feeding her tiny spoonfuls of it until she had eaten the whole thing.

Erdlu egg was one of the most nourishing foods he knew of. Less than an hour after he'd eaten his, Jedra began to feel stronger; and Kayan recovered some of her color as well. He fed her another one, hoping she would regain consciousness inside the crystal and break her link with it, but when another hour passed with no change in her condition he lay back on

the cushion and tried to mindlink with her again. If he could reach her, maybe he could pull her back out of the crystal.

Her presence was so faint it was hardly detectable, but when he concentrated he could sense it. It was a little like the crystal itself had been: faint and hard to reach. However, now that he'd had some experience breaking through the barrier into it, he knew what to look for. He imagined reaching through and touching Kayan, envisioned his hand penetrating the barrier that separated them and his whole body following through until he stood beside her again in the grassy courtyard.

He felt the barrier resist, then a moment of dizziness, and he was there. It was much easier the second time.

The moment his vision cleared, however, he realized he'd made a mistaken assumption. He hadn't gone straight to the courtyard. He was back in the clearing in the forest where they had originally arrived. Only this time the trees weren't in a loose ring at the edge of the grass; they had moved closer and now leaned toward him with menacing branches and dangling vines.

Was Kayan mad at him again? She'd called up the thunderstorm last time she was angry; if she'd regained consciousness and thought Jedra had abandoned her, she might have turned the world against him again. It might not even have been a deliberate decision.

Wind rattled the branches and made them swoop back and forth overhead. The vines swung madly, some cracking like whips as the branches flung them back and forth. Jedra ducked a particularly low one, but he felt another thump into his back and coil around his waist.

Get off! he commanded it, thinking that the world should obey his wishes too, but the vine clung stubbornly. Another one swooped down and grabbed his right arm. He pulled it free with his left hand, but more and more vines snared his arms and legs faster than he could fight them off.

Kayan, call them off! he mindsent. *Kayan!*

She didn't respond. Something did, though. The vines yanked Jedra into the air, and thunder blasted out of a clear sky. Cursing and trying to

stay upright, Jedra tried everything he could think of to escape, but he couldn't make the vines burn or freeze solid and he couldn't break them either psionically or with his own physical strength. He was trapped.

Then he heard the thump of massive footsteps. The forest shook with them, and Jedra bounced at the end of the vines. A deep, throaty roar echoed through the trees, and the sound of splintering wood accompanied another heavy footfall.

Time to leave, Jedra thought. He built up his mental barrier again to block the mindlink with the crystal world, but the world refused to fade. Either he didn't have the strength to build a complete barrier, or else the barrier didn't make any difference now.

The footfalls and the roaring grew closer. Jedra saw a treetop disappear, and a moment later the loud crack of its trunk breaking reached him. He heard more trees topple over, then the last one separating him from the creature crashed to the ground, and he got his first glimpse of the beast.

It was some kind of dragon. It had scaly, purplish green iridescent skin, and stood erect on two enormously powerful rear legs, with a long, massive whip tail stretching out behind. Its body was at least thirty feet tall, and its head was a scaly oblong slashed across by a toothy mouth easily big enough to swallow Jedra in one gulp. Its forearms were short in comparison with its legs, but they were still at least six feet long and heavily muscled. They ended in cruel claws, and Jedra recognized the limp form clutched in them.

"Kayan!" he screamed.

The dragon bellowed at him, its hot, fetid breath washing over him and making him choke. Jedra struggled against the vines, but they clung tight. He tried mind-linking with Kayan again, and this time he felt a faint response.

Kayan, wake up! he sent.

Mmm?

The dragon lifted her up to its eye level and peered at her through first one, then the other of its foot-wide pupils. Then it lowered her toward its toothy mouth and opened its jaws.

Jedra shoved at its arms psionically, pushing them aside, then he tugged at Kayan and wrenched her free of the dragon's grasp. It bellowed an ear-splitting roar and lunged after her, but Jedra swept her aside. The motion set him swinging wildly from the vines, and Kayan nearly smacked into a tree trunk, but he managed to bring her around just in time and fly her out of the monster's reach.

But not out of the trees' reach. Dozens of vines whipped out and snared her, and Jedra could do nothing to stop them. Within seconds she hung beside him in the trees, while the dragon bent low to examine them both.

It rubbed its hands together like a gourmet contemplating a sumptuous meal, and a thick rope of drool spilled over its teeth. It grunted softly—for a thirty-foot dragon—and its nostrils flared in and out with its excited breaths.

Jedra? Kayan's voice said in his mind. Her mind-sending was weak, but she was conscious.

I'm here, he sent. He tried again to link with her, and this time he was rewarded with a rush of sensation. Fatigue and anger washed through him, but fear overrode them both.

The dragon backed up a step. It opened its mouth again, and Jedra braced himself for another roar or even a blast of flame, but instead it spoke in a deep, rumbling voice. "Worship me," it said, "and I will spare you."

The language was one that Jedra had never heard before, but he realized he was understanding it through Kayan's mind. He mindsent to her, *What is this thing?*

I don't know, she replied. *I just got here.*

The dragon roared again. "Worship me!" it bellowed.

"Who are you?" Jedra shouted back.

"I am Yoncalla, lord of all creation." The dragon held its head high and bellowed at the sky. Wind swirled, and thunder boomed.

"Pretty impressive," Jedra admitted, but he was thinking that Kayan had called up a thunderstorm without even intending to. In this world, practically anything was possible.

“I will impress you more,” Yoncalla said, and the dragon body began to elongate. The arms and massive legs shortened and the head narrowed, while the body stretched out and up until it was a sixty or seventy foot snake. Its five-foot-wide body coiled around and around until the head was once again level with its dangling captives, and its forked tongue flickered out and waved just in front of their faces. Its eyes had become yellow slits that didn’t blink.

“I can be whatever I choose,” the snake said, its improbably flexible lips forming the words.

Jedra had no doubt it could. He and Kayan probably could as well, if their enhanced appearance earlier was any indication, but they still didn’t know how to control this bizarre world.

The snake began to metamorphose again. As it thickened and shortened into a new body shape, Jedra said to Kayan, *We’ve got to get free. The reason we both fell unconscious is that we’re starving to death. I made it back to reality and fed us a couple of erdlu eggs, but that won’t last long.*

Wonderful, she said. I’m open to suggestions, if you’ve got any.

Last time I was able to have by breaking our mindlink, but you stayed behind. And when I came back, I didn’t link with you first. I think the crystal has its own kind of link.

The snake had become a round, furry blob about fifteen feet thick. Gravity flattened it on top and bottom, and a single eye on a stalk protruded like a flower from the top. A round mouth below looked like a rodent burrow in the creature’s sandy brown hide.

The mouth spoke. “Worship me.”

Don’t laugh, Jedra warned.

Kayan tugged on the vines holding her in the air. *That won’t be hard.*

They needed to know more about this place and about this bizarre being who had captured them. Aloud, Jedra said, “We hardly know you. You’re Yoncalla, lord of creation, but who is that? Where did you come from?”

The furry blob expanded like a balloon. "I am the original being. I built this world with the power of my own mind."

Kayan asked, "And you live here all alone?"

The blob shrank again. "There were once many of us, each with our own world. We crossed back and forth at will, and we fought great battles. But one by one the others grew frail and died, until only I remain. I am the last of the mighty conquerors, the last immortal."

The blob stretched out again, growing arms and legs and a regular head until Yoncalla stood before them, a fifty-foot-tall, perfectly proportioned human. He was nude, and his skin was tanned bronze over his entire body. His muscles rippled as he bent down to put his head on Jedra's and Kayan's level, but then he evidently thought better of it and with a wave of his hands the trees holding them grew upward instead.

Now they dangled over an even greater drop, but that seemed to be the least of their worries.

"This was my original form," Yoncalla said. "Pleasing, is it not?"

"Very," Kayan said.

What? Jedra demanded. *He's a musclebound freak.*

Kayan shrugged. *I'm just humoring him.*

Yoncalla said, "In this form, I was king of all Athas. I ruled the entire land with an iron fist."

Kayan said, "Wait a minute. You know about Athas?"

Yoncalla's laugh shook the ground. "Of course I know about it. I owned it, until my physical body could no longer be sustained. Tell me, how fares it now?"

Kayan looked to Jedra. Jedra shrugged and said, "Not very well, compared to this. It's mostly desert, and your city is a complete ruin."

The fifty-foot immortal balled his fists, and tiny bolts of lightning flashed in a halo around his head. "What! A ruin? How did that happen?"

"It was that way when we found it," Jedra said. He neglected to mention that he and Kayan had finished it off.

Yoncalla shook his head. "My city. My glorious city. And the world is... a desert?"

"That's right."

"It was those damned mages, wasn't it?" Yoncalla asked, but he didn't wait for a response. "I knew they would get greedy. I should have crushed them all the moment they learned to power their spells with the energy of life." He swept his hand through the top of a tree beside him, snapping it off with a loud crack of splintering wood. "Maybe I should do that yet."

"Uh, that might be kind of hard to do," Jedra said. "They're running things now, and this world exists in a crystal no bigger than my thumb."

"I know that," Yoncalla said. He snapped his fingers and thousands of similar crystals fell out of the sky like hail. "New worlds, all of them," he said, "but all are subordinate to mine. Just as you are now. I am the master here."

He keeps repeating that, like he's trying to convince himself it's true, Kayan said. *I'll bet he hasn't had a visitor in here since the cataclysm.*

Probably not. Jedra tugged on the vines binding his hands. They tightened around his wrists with more strength than he could summon to pull them free. If he and Kayan were going to get free, they wouldn't be able to do it with brute force.

"Sure you're the master here," he said, "but yours isn't the only crystal left, you know. I found dozens of them in the ruins. They looked like they had all been tied together with wires on some kind of framework. They weren't hooked together anymore, but I could still sense some kind of life in them."

Yoncalla staggered back as if Jedra had struck him, his right leg snapping off a tree in the process. He didn't even notice. "What? They still live?"

"Some of them," Jedra said. "About half of them were dead."

"Only half?" Yoncalla reached out to a treetop for support. "I thought—it has been thousands of years! Millennia, all alone. I was sure they had all perished."

“Not yet.” Jedra would have crossed his arms if the vines had let him. “I’ve got one more live one in the very next room.”

“Who is it?” Yoncalla’s eyes glittered. He leaned forward eagerly.

“I don’t know,” Jedra said. “I haven’t entered it yet.”

Yoncalla laughed. “You had best take care when you do. Few immortals are as benevolent as I.”

Kayan shook her tethered hands at him. “You call this benevolent?”

“I do.” Suddenly Kayan’s body sagged in her restraints.

Her hair turned white and her face wrinkled, and her eyes glazed over with a milky film.

“You see what I am capable of?” said Yoncalla.

Kayan! Jedra sent, struggling to free himself, but she replied, *I’m fine. None of this is real. It’s all appearances here. In fact, I’m beginning to get an idea...*

Her body grew younger again, and she said to Yoncalla, “You could learn a few things about dealing with women.” She gestured with her hands and the vines lowered her gently to the ground and released her.

Hey, how did you do that? Jedra tugged frantically on his own vines, but they didn’t budge.

I just wished for it, Kayan said. *That’s apparently how this place works.*

“You cannot escape me,” Yoncalla said. As he spoke, the grass grew up around Kayan and snared her legs.

She looked down at it and the grass turned brown and brittle. She kicked free of it and stood there in front of Yoncalla’s right foot, her head barely reaching his shin. “I’d love to play longer,” she said, “but I’m sorry, I really have to be going.” A hole opened up in the ground, and she jumped into it.

“No!” Yoncalla shouted. He stomped on the hole, but she was already gone. Jedra felt the mindlink grow more tenuous, stretching out as if over a long distance, but it didn’t break. Kayan’s voice, nearly drowned out in the sudden wind that shook the tree, said to him, *Just wish to be free.*

What do you think I've been doing? he demanded, but he realized what she meant. He'd tried psionics and he'd struggled against the vines, but he hadn't actually tried to manipulate the crystal world on its own terms. He imagined it now, trying to visualize a way out. Instead of Kayan's hole in the ground, he imagined the wind whirling around him, enclosing him and carrying him off through the crystal sky.

Sure enough, the vines snapped like string, and the wind bore him aloft. Yoncalla made a desperate lunge for him, but Jedra's whirlwind surged upward and the would-be god's oversized hand swept by yards below.

"Don't leave me!" Yoncalla shouted. "If you stay, *I'll worship you!*"

Then the whirlwind reached the sky. Jedra felt the same disorientation as before, and he found himself in Kitarak's library again. Kayan was struggling to sit up beside him.

We're still linked, she said.

He nodded. They were both so tired they hardly felt it, but he knew what would happen when they separated. *Promise you won't hate me*, he said.

I'll try.

He reached out and took her in his arms. It felt like hugging a skeleton. Her face was all harsh angles and sagging skin, but he kissed her anyway. The mindlink momentarily strengthened, then weakened again when they drew apart.

Here goes, Kayan said.

Her presence faded from Jedra's mind, and all the troubles of the world came crashing down to replace it. Of *two* worlds. He thought of Yoncalla, suddenly abandoned again after millennia of isolation, and he felt bad for doing that to him. If he hadn't been so weak, he might have tried to go back.

And then there was what he had done to Kayan. He couldn't look at her. She got up and staggered into the kitchen, but even though his stomach screamed for food, he stayed in the library.

How long had he been gone this time? The candle had only burned down an inch or so—not even an hour then. An hour, and all he had eaten had been used up. No wonder Kayan had fallen unconscious before he did; she hadn't eaten before they entered the crystal, and they had been gone for nearly a day.

Jedra picked up the tiny world and turned it over in his hand. Yoncalla was definitely still alive in there. Alive and active; his presence radiated like any other mind would. There would be no way Kitarak could dismiss it now.

He thought briefly of calling for Kitarak. He and Kayan obviously needed their mentor. But the tohr-kreen had been gone only a couple of days; he probably wouldn't return even if Jedra could contact him, which was unlikely. Kitarak probably wouldn't lower his shield for a week, just to make sure Jedra and Kayan truly solved their differences before they called him back.

Jedra went into the kitchen just long enough to take a drink and pick up another bag of nuts. Kayan's bulging eyes followed him as he went past her, but she said nothing. That was all right. He didn't know what to say to her, either.

* * *

Kayan slept in the library again, Jedra got up periodically to check on her, but her breathing remained steady and she didn't convulse the way he'd seen some starving people do. She'd evidently gotten food soon enough to prevent permanent damage. He left her to heal in her sleep.

When the morning sun finally began to filter through the skylights, Jedra wondered if they had been covered with sand. The light was deep red, almost like candlelight. But when he checked the skylights he saw that they were clean, and then he realized he was seeing normal sunlight. His eyes had adjusted to the brilliant sun inside the crystal, and now Athas's coppery

red cinder seemed dull by comparison. He hoped he would grow used to it again, or he would be spending the rest of his life in dim twilight.

Hot, dim twilight. Even inside the stone house the temperature rose with the sun, but when Jedra went outside to relieve himself the intense heat felt like a physical force beating down on him. He had never realized just how oppressive it was until he'd sampled another world.

But that one was just the construction of a crazy person's mind. Such a thing probably couldn't exist... or could it? Legend told of a time when Athas's sun was brighter, and Kayan had said that the Sea of Silt was once an ocean. Who could say?

Jedra always went around to the back of the house to urinate, giving the tree that grew there a little more water, but today when he rounded the side of the rock pile he stopped short when he saw what had happened: The storm had toppled the tree. Its trunk had splintered about three feet off the ground, and the top had fallen with enough force to break two of its three big limbs. The remaining one rose into the sky like a tree itself, but its leaves had all been ripped loose, leaving only the skeletal branches.

Jedra walked up to it and snapped off a twig. Brittle. The fierce desert heat had already baked it dry. Jedra stood there and idly broke the twig into pieces while he contemplated the bare corpse of Kitarak's shade tree. This was how everything on Athas ended—everything that escaped being eaten, anyway—bare and dry under the hot sun. Like the sun-bleached piles of bones that he and Kayan had seen in the deep desert, marking the lairs of underground cacti. Only the cacti themselves escaped the relentless rays of the dark sun.

That wouldn't stop them from dying, though, Jedra realized. Sand cacti had an even more prolonged death awaiting them, for after they trapped and fed on a desert creature, they had no way to get rid of the pile of bones. Nothing else would venture near, and the cactus would eventually starve to death, probably after sending forth seeds—most of which would in turn be eaten by scavengers before they could germinate.

Jedra sighed. It was all part of a bigger whole, he supposed, but that didn't make it any less depressing.

The sorcerer-kings cheated death with their magic, but if any of the legends were to be believed they usually died all the more horribly for it when their time finally came. And if Yoncalla was a fair representative of the ancients' method of achieving immortality, then that was hardly better. Immortality for Yoncalla seemed to be little more than the chance to go stir-crazy amid his own creations.

It might still beat the alternative. Jedra turned away from the tree and looked out across the sandy, rock-strewn ground to the steep canyon walls. Down here in the bottom of the gorge it was easy to forget that the rest of the world existed, but Jedra knew it carried on as usual. Someday he would have to venture back out into it, and even his psionic training couldn't guarantee him a better life than what he'd had living on the streets of Urik. The only certainty out there was the knowledge that the moment he let down his guard, someone or something would be waiting to exploit his moment of weakness.

His full bladder reminded him that he had come out here for a reason. He cast out with his danger sense, thinking wryly how ridiculous it would be to be caught with his pants down by some desert animal, but the only impression he got of life came from a couple hundred yards off, at the base of the canyon wall, and even that wasn't dangerous. In fact, its psionic impression was one of warmth and contentment.

This I've got to see, he thought as he finished his business and walked toward the consciousness he had sensed. He approached it cautiously, but his danger sense continued to tell him there was no threat so he climbed over the rocks near the base of the canyon wall until he found what he was looking for. There, in a tunnel burrowed beneath a boulder, was a jankx den, with two slender, golden babies curled up around each other, their long snouts tucked beneath their paws as they slept.

Jedra's immediate response was to look for the mother, but after a moment's thought he realized what had happened. Jankx foraged at night and slept by day; if the mother wasn't there with her babies this late in the morning it could only mean she was dead. Either something had caught her in the night, or the storm had killed her.

Jedra knelt there looking at the babies and wondering what to do with them. He had always thought of jankx as food animals, and relatively troublesome ones at that, since they had poison spurs in their paws, but he couldn't eat these two babies. Nor, he realized, could he just leave them to starve. But he couldn't bring them food in their den, because a scavenger would eventually find them and they wouldn't have any defense. He was just coming to the realization that he would have to build some kind of cage and take care of them until they matured when his danger sense finally twinged and he looked up to see a pair of lean, gray zhackals loping down the canyon toward him.

He immediately reached into the den with his telekinetic power and lifted the baby jankx out. They awoke and began to squirm, making tiny, high-pitched squeaks. The zhackals' ears perked up, and they increased their speed, running straight for Jedra. He took off toward the house, but he'd only gone a few steps before he realized that he wouldn't make it before they reached him. Not in the kind of shape he was in. He kept running anyway, trying to get as close as he could before he had to turn and fight.

When he looked over his shoulder again he saw three more zhackals emerging from farther up the canyon. There was no way he could stand up against that many. Maybe he and Kayan together could, but not now, not this quickly. He had time for only one thing, and he did it without hesitation: He threw the jankx babies into the path of the foremost two zhackals.

He was afraid they would ignore the smaller prey, but zhackals preferred not to fight when they didn't have to. These were content with a smaller meal; the two chasing Jedra skidded to a stop and grabbed the jankx by their tails, flipping them playfully into the air and catching them again in their fanged mouths.

Disgusted with himself as much as the zhackals, Jedra ran the last few yards to the house and stood by the door, panting, while the other zhackals caught up to the first two and joined in the fun. Jedra considered pelting them with rocks now that he was safe, but it was too late to save the baby

jankx so it seemed a pointless gesture. Let the zhackals have their snack. The babies would have died anyway, so it really didn't matter. Except that Jedra felt even worse than if he had never known they existed. He glanced over at the downed tree, shook his head, and went back inside.

Kayan was in the kitchen, working the pump handle up and down to refill the jug they kept on the counter, but her arms were so frail she couldn't get up any speed and nothing was coming out of the spout.

"Here, let me get that for you," Jedra said, reaching down into the well psionically to lift some water out.

"I can do it," she snapped at him.

He reeled back as if she'd slapped him. "I was just trying to help."

"Yeah."

He considered telling her about the baby jankx and the zhackals outside, and about the tree, but with the mood she was in he decided to wait. He turned away, but realizing he couldn't stand the thought of another day of angry silence, he turned back around and said, "I'm sorry I got us in trouble again. You know I didn't mean to."

She nodded. "I know. But you still just about got us killed."

"Yes, I did," he said. "And you saved us both and I'm very grateful and I don't want to fight anymore. I can't stand it when you reject me like this."

Water finally started dribbling into the jug. Kayan kept pumping as she said, "It won't kill you."

"How do you know?"

"I'm a healer. I know these things." When the jug overflowed she stopped pumping and turned to face Jedra. "Look, I just need some time alone, all right? The last couple of days have been just as hard on me as they have on you. I'll be all right, but not if I have to hold your hand all the time."

"I wasn't asking you to hold my hand."

She shook her head. "Arrgh! Can't you get it through your thick head? That was a metaphor."

“All right, all right.” Jedra shook his head and retreated into the bedroom.

He tried to rest and regain his strength, but when he lay back on the cushion he remained wide awake. He could hear every sound Kayan made in the kitchen, and he noticed every nook and bump in the arched stone ceiling overhead. He became aware of another nagging presence in the room, too: The crystals beckoned him like a marketplace prostitute. Yoncalla’s tugged the strongest, but the other one held the allure of complete mystery. What kind of world might be inside it? Would it be another paradise, inhabited by another insane immortal, or might it be something completely different? Right now he was in the mood for different.

He resisted for nearly a day, but he didn’t have Kayan to distract him, and now that Kitarak was gone he didn’t have lessons to help keep him busy, either. He finally convinced himself that he would be safe enough if he just slipped in and took a quick look around, then slipped out before whoever inhabited the crystal found out he was there. It had taken Yoncalla a whole day to notice him and Kayan, and even then he had probably done so only because Jedra had made so much psionic noise when he was trying frantically to mindlink with her.

He ate a hearty meal first, just in case. He didn’t think it would matter nearly as much this time since he wouldn’t be linked with Kayan while he was gone, but it wouldn’t hurt to stoke up anyway.

Assuming he went anywhere, of course. Without Kayan’s extra power to help him, he might not be able to break through the crystal’s barrier. Still, curiosity made him try. He lay back on the cushion so he wouldn’t fall over this time when his mind left his body, set the crystal beside him, and concentrated on entering it.

Yoncalla’s world was a continual distraction. Every time Jedra felt the unknown world’s barrier weakening, he felt himself slipping toward Yoncalla’s world instead. Finally he levitated the offending crystal into Kitarak’s study just to put a little distance between him and it, and when he tried again the distraction seemed a little less. He still had to be very careful

which crystal he entered, but when he finally felt the barrier give way, he was sure it was the new one.

There was the same moment of disorientation as before, then he opened his eyes to harsh blue light coming from rectangular panels overhead. He was in a cave of some sort—no, it was another enormous stone building. And this one was full of people.

They were everywhere, and all on the move. Men and women of all ages, even children—everyone seemed to have a destination and strode purposefully toward it. They all wore unfamiliar clothing, mostly tight-fitting pants and shirts made of smooth, brightly dyed cloth, and none of them paid the slightest attention to each other. Jedra stood a foot taller than most of them, and though he was the only one not hurrying anywhere, they ignored him, too.

The place smelled like too many unwashed bodies. A constant, low-level rushing sound of voices and footsteps masked a deeper rumble that was more felt than heard. Jedra watched people come and go from stairways leading down into subterranean catacombs, but he didn't feel like seeing what was down there. He felt too closed in already. He had to get out. Wide stairs led up from the main floor to doors on all sides; Jedra fell in behind a large bearded man in a dark overcoat, letting him clear a path through the throng until they made it outside.

It was brighter than Jedra had expected. From inside, under that glaring blue light, it had seemed dark out—and it was indeed night—but he could still see clearly. Bright glowing lanterns atop poles provided plenty of light, and more light spilled from buildings lining the street.

And what a street! The rushing noise here was even louder than inside. Just a few feet from the narrow walkway on which Jedra and a thousand other people stood, hundreds of multicolored beasts careened past, following one another in a dizzying stampede from right to left. Their eyes glowed too brightly to look at, and they growled as they passed.

Jedra stepped back, but he bumped into one of the people streaming by. “Wal finida graben!” the man growled at him, hardly breaking stride. More people shoved past, jostling Jedra aside until he stood by the edge of the

street again. Even that was no refuge, however; a man and a woman stepped up beside him, almost into the path of the rushing beasts, and the man raised his arm in a casual wave. He called out, “Gimpel!” and one of the creatures—a yellow one—stopped for him, eliciting angry outcries from the ones behind it. Only when the man reached out and opened a door in its side did Jedra look closer and realize it was a chariot. It had no draft animals or slaves pulling it, so it must have been magically powered. The man and his woman climbed inside, and the chariot roared away with them both inside, leaving Jedra in the throng.

Jedra had thought that Athas was depressing, and that Yoncalla was mad, but *this* was the insane world. There were too many people, and there was too much activity for anyone to follow. Jedra felt panic closing in on him. He had grown up in a city, but even on market days Urik had never been like this. He needed to get out of this mob. He considered going back home, but he’d only been here a few minutes, and he hadn’t really learned anything about the place yet. If he could just find someplace quiet to observe it all from, he could at least try to figure out what was going on.

Maybe from atop one of the buildings. He looked up... and nearly fell over backward. He’d thought the buildings were tall in the ruined city where he’d met Kitarak, but here they were impossibly high. A stray breeze could blow one over.

A woman laughed when she saw the expression on his face. Jedra blushed and turned away. All right, so the buildings were tall. They would still make a good refuge. He raised his arms and gave a little leap, expecting to fly the way he had in Yoncalla’s world, but he just plopped back to the gray stone walkway. He heard laughter around him, and for the first time the people nearby stepped aside to give him room.

“Thanks,” he said, and tried again, directing his thoughts in a concentrated wish: *fly*. He didn’t have any better luck this time, though, and now the people around him laughed outright. A few pointed at him and spoke more unfamiliar words, but Jedra didn’t have to know the language to know what they were saying. They thought he was crazy.

Well, that was one piece of information, then. People couldn't fly in this world. That would explain all the chariots. Blushing furiously now, Jedra began walking through the crowd. The first few people gave way before him, but the ones behind them didn't know that he was the source of the commotion, or even that any commotion had gone on, so he had to jostle his way along with the rest of them.

He'd gone less than a hundred paces before someone shouldered him aside and he lost his balance. Without thinking, he stepped out into the street to keep from falling over. One of the yellow chariots brushed by him, its hard flank banging painfully into his thigh and knocking him back. The chariot blared angrily as it continued past, and Jedra fell against one of the metal light posts. He clutched it for dear life, which brought forth more laughter from the people on the walkway, but he didn't care. Better safe and embarrassed than dead beneath a chariot.

His leg hurt. His heart was pounding, and his breath was coming in tight little gasps. It was time to leave. Jedra imagined a hole in the gray stone walkway through which he could fall out of this mad world...

...but no hole appeared.

I wish to be out of here, he thought, but nothing happened.

Hmm. This place obviously followed different rules. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on finding a pathway out of it, but when he opened them he was still in the throng of people and chariots. And nobody spoke his language, so he couldn't even ask for help.

Suddenly he realized he was being an idiot. He had a perfectly good method of communication he hadn't even tried. *Do you understand me this way?* he mindsent to a man passing by, but the moment he tried it he realized that wouldn't work. He couldn't sense the man's mind at all.

Confused, he turned his attention to another person on the walkway beside him, but he felt no mind there either. He tried to contact another and another, but he got nothing from any of them. Were they all zombies? Magically animated corpses? Or were they something else entirely?

Jedra closed his eyes tight against his mounting anxiety, but the city's noise still crashed in on him. He held his hands over his ears, but that barely muted it. How could people live in such a place? It would drive him crazy to be in such a hectic environment all the time.

Maybe that was why nobody here seemed to have a mind. To escape the insanity around them, they had all retreated into some inner world, leaving their bodies behind to carry on without them.

Worlds within worlds within worlds... the possibility frightened him more than anything else he had seen here.

He had to get out of this place. *Now*. If he couldn't leave the entire world, he could at least leave the city.

With renewed determination, he stepped into the flowing river of people again and began to walk.

He lost track of how many streets he crossed, how many thousands of people he passed on the walkways, how many chariots roared past him. His leg flashed with pain at every step, but the rest of him felt numb. He tried dozens of times to escape back into the real world—*his* world—but remained trapped within the frantic city. At last he stepped from a canyon of giant buildings to see a line of darkness before him. All he had to do was cross one more busy street, and beyond it waited an expanse of unnaturally even grass stretching off toward a copse of trees. He waited for a gap between the chariots and sprinted across, ignoring their angry bleats, then he hopped the low stone wall separating the street from the grass and continued to run past the few startled people walking beside a pond until he reached the edge of the trees. Beneath the trees' protective cover he found a rock to sit on, and he closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

His tension began to drain away. There had to be a way out of here; he just hadn't tried the right thing yet. If psionics didn't work, then maybe magic would. He probably just needed to find a mage who could work the spell for him. He would search for one soon, but for now he would just relax. When his heart quit pounding, he would go on.

The city noise was fainter here, but he could still hear it clearly. It was a constant rushing sound, occasionally pierced by chariot outcries and once

by an even louder wailing that rose and fell in pitch over and over as it faded into the distance. Jedra put his hands over his ears to block it all out so he could think, but that made him feel even more confined. He felt as if a giant hand were squeezing his chest, and his vision swirled as if he'd stood up too suddenly. He unplugged his ears and tried more deep breaths.

"Hevar," a voice said right by his side. Jedra jumped up and swung around to see a boy a couple years younger than himself standing there, his hands balled into fists and held ready in front of him. Behind him stood four more even younger boys, all in unmistakably aggressive poses. All five wore dark, tight-fitting clothes, making them difficult to see in the dim light.

Jedra hadn't sensed them at all. Of course not—his psionic danger sense was just as dead as all his other abilities. Suddenly sweating, he backed away slowly, hands held out palms-forward in a gesture of peace, and said, "Sorry. I didn't know this was your place. I'll leave." The boy who had spoken said, "Kemali non vanada." His tone of voice made it sound like a command, and sure enough, the others spread out to block Jedra's escape. Jedra had witnessed the same sort of thing before in Urik. He had never had to fight there, though; his danger sense had always warned him in time.

"Look," he said, his voice wavering, "I don't want to fight you. I just want to go home."

The leader of the boys laughed and said, "Delan." He reached out and tugged on the sleeve of Jedra's tunic. The other boys laughed with him. One of the boys who had flanked him said, "Marada delor?" and Jedra turned to say, "Sorry, I don't under—"

The first boy hit him in the left side of the head. Jedra's teeth clacked together, biting into his cheek and tongue, and his ear rang. "Ow!" he shouted, jumping back to avoid another blow, but one of the boys behind him hit him in the side, and another in the back. He whirled around and struck at them, fear making him swing wildly, but his longer arms let him connect solidly with one's chest even so.

“Hooda!” the leader shouted, hitting Jedra in the head again. Jedra spun around and punched him in the nose, two quick, almost instinctive jabs, then he whirled around to face whoever else was close. It was nearly impossible to keep all five boys at bay; they danced forward and back, one or two leaning in and striking while he protected himself from another. Blows fell on him nearly constantly, mostly on the sides and back, but a few landed on his head and face.

His elven ancestry did at least give him the advantage of reach. He didn’t know how to fight well, but he was fast, and he could snap a fist in past his attackers’ guard without letting them get close enough to return his punches. And now he was getting mad. Through his rising anger he noted with satisfaction that the leader was at least bleeding from both nostrils, even while he tasted blood flowing freely from his own. This couldn’t last, though. He couldn’t win against five people, even if they were just children.

That realization transformed his anger back into terror. “Help!” he shouted. He looked past the boys to the open grass, but the only person he saw was hurrying away.

His plea brought forth more laughter from the boys. They shouted something, but their words blended together in Jedra’s ringing ears. Another fist from the side hit him in the right eye, and his vision on that side burst into a shower of light. Screaming in pain, Jedra kicked out sideways with his right foot and felt it connect solidly with the stomach of the boy who had hit him. Jedra heard the boy go down. He spun around, punching and kicking to drive the others back, then he leaped through the gap he had just opened in their ring.

Only he hadn’t hurt the boy on the ground as badly as he’d thought. The boy grabbed Jedra’s leg as he jumped over him, and Jedra toppled off balance and fell to the ground. He wrenched his foot free and jumped up to run again, but it was too late. The others had entrapped him again.

And now they were angry. They had just been playing with him before, but he had fought back too well; now the leader reached to his waistband and withdrew from a pocket a dark folding knife, which he snapped open with a practiced flick of his wrist. Jedra heard the *snick* of four more knives

opening. His heart seemed ready to tear itself from his chest. He kicked out frantically at the boy he'd knocked down, trying once again to make an escape, but the boy dodged back, and before Jedra could recover and turn, he felt a sudden burst of searing pain in his left side.

Blood bubbled out through the slash in his tunic. Jedra clasped his hand over the wound, but another hot flare ripped along his right arm, then another in his back. He screamed and kicked out again and again, trying to drive the boys back without exposing his arms or face, but they merely slashed his legs until he could barely stand. Then he saw a silvery blur slide toward his left eye, felt a hot streak of pain slide up his cheek—and his eye went dark.

His right eye gave him only blurred shadows. Jedra kicked and swung his fists blindly, fighting by feel now, but even though he connected again and again, the knives slashed him relentlessly. He felt them plunge deep into his belly and sides, felt them slice his left ear, felt them slam to the hilt in his chest. He didn't even notice when he fell over; his mouth was just suddenly filled with dirt.

He folded himself into a ball, trying to protect his vital organs, but it was far too late for that. His entire body was slick with blood, and more bubbled out with each heartbeat.

Light and noise receded. The fiery knife wounds became mere stings. Jedra knew he was dying.

This is one way to escape, he thought as he felt the final knife slide into his heart. But where do I go from here?

CHAPTER NINE

The answer to that became apparent a moment later when he opened his eyes to find a blurry Kayan bending over him, one hand held against his forehead and another on his chest. His body still burned with pain, but that was already fading.

He tried to speak, but his tongue was still swollen where he'd bitten it.

Kayan? he mindsent.

Who did you expect? she answered.

I—I didn't expect anyone. I thought I was dead.

So did I. I heard you convulsing, and I came in here to find you bleeding to death. What did you do to yourself?

He tried to sit up, but Kayan pushed him back. *Not yet. You're still bleeding. What did you do?*

I, um, I went into the other crystal.

You idiot. Jedra felt her anger course down through her arms into him, burning worse than the knife wounds.

"Aaahh!" he cried aloud. *Stop it!*

Sorry. She took a deep breath, and he felt the soothing flow of her healing power wash through him again. *That doesn't explain these wounds,* she said.

Jedra's vision cleared, and he saw the scowl on Kayan's face. *I was stabbed!* he told her. *A gang of children attacked me, and I couldn't get away.*

Children? she asked contemptuously.

Young boys, he said. *The oldest was two or three years younger than me. They were tough enough, though. They surrounded me, and they beat me up, and then they cut me.*

What did you do to them? she asked.

Nothing! I was trying to find a way out of there, but nothing I tried would work. I was thinking of what else I could do when they jumped me.

Uh-huh. Kayan obviously didn't believe him. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, and Jedra could see the tendons in her neck. By the dim light coming through the window and the skylight, it looked like late evening—only two days, then, since their ordeal in Yoncalla's world. She still hadn't recovered from her near-starvation there, and here she was trying to heal him.

Stop, he said, trying again to sit up and succeeding this time. *You've done enough. I can heal myself from here.*

You think so? Kayan tugged open his tunic—bloody, but still in one piece—and pointed to the dozens of red scars crisscrossing his chest. *Some of these are deep. I'll say when you're safe on your own. Now lie back down.*

Jedra did as he was told. Kayan rubbed her hands up and down his body, spreading health wherever she touched. While she did, he told her about the crystal world with its tall buildings and its streets full of careening chariots and its millions of people flowing like rivers. Kayan listened to him, but when he wound down she said, *I don't know who's crazier, the immortal who lives there or you for going in alone in the first place. I wouldn't believe a word of it if it weren't for these knife wounds.*

Jedra shook his head. *How could those have happened here? My body was here the whole time, wasn't it?*

The power of the mind is greater than you know. Kayan lifted up a flap of his tunic. *This didn't even get damaged, except for bloodstains, but your mind was evidently convinced you were being stabbed in that other world, so it recreated the wounds you felt while you were there.*

I'd just as soon it hadn't, he replied. *But thank you for repairing the damage. Can I sit up now?*

Go ahead.

Jedra did, holding on to her arm for support, but rather than let go when he made it upright he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Thank you, he said, and then aloud he echoed it. “Thank you.”

“Just don’t do it again,” she murmured.

“What, this?” He kissed her again.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do.” He reached over and picked up the crystal off the floor beside the blood-drenched sleeping cushion. He hefted it in his hand, contemplating its fate. The way he felt right now he could smash it to splinters, but when he tried to throw it against the stone wall he couldn’t bring himself to do it, even to as outrageous and unfriendly a world as that. Psionics didn’t work there; he couldn’t know if all those millions of people were truly mindless, or if he just couldn’t sense them. And the immortal who’d created them, if that’s how the world had come to be... no matter how crazy he’d grown in his millennia of isolation, it wasn’t Jedra’s place to judge him.

But he didn’t want to leave it for someone else to stumble across. He got up and took the crystal into the kitchen, where he stuck it in through the pump spout and levitated it all the way down the shaft, past the lifting valve, and on into the deep recesses of the well.

There. The inhabitants could go on about their bizarre business without hurting anyone now.

As long as he was in the kitchen, he began preparing a meal. He took more inix steaks out of the cold-box—pausing to still the heat that had leaked into it while he’d been away—and rummaged through the vegetable storage bins until he found the makings for stew. Kayan joined him, helping cut things and putting everything into a pot that Jedra heated psionically, and within a half hour the whole house smelled wonderful. They were both suddenly ravenous; they sat down across from each other at Kitarak’s oversized table and began to devour the stew like tigones at a fresh kill.

The last of the daylight had faded by the time their stew finished cooking; they ate by candlelight. After his second bowl, Jedra looked across the table at Kayan’s shadowy form and said, “Do you forgive me?”

“For what?” she asked, her spoon half raised to her mouth.

“For everything.”

“That’s a lot to forgive someone for.”

“I suppose.” He took another bite. “On the other hand, think how virtuous it’ll make you feel.”

“Hmm. That’s a point.” She ate another few bites. “I know what you’re thinking.”

Jedra laughed. “Then tell me so we’ll both know.”

“You’re thinking we should ask Kitarak to come back and finish teaching us what we need to know.”

He hadn’t been thinking that—he’d only wanted to reconcile with Kayan—but now that she mentioned it, that did sound like a good idea. “Do you think he’d come?” he asked. “It’s only been a few days.”

Kayan shrugged. “All we can do is ask him and see.”

“All right.” Jedra reached out his right hand and took her left. “Let’s see if we can find him.”

Their mental union felt like old times—the intense rush of pleasure, the complete blending of their personalities, the orders-of-magnitude increase in their power. They concentrated on the unique signature of Kitarak’s mind and sent their message radiating out to find him wherever he had gone:
We’re ready for you to come home now.

With mindsending they couldn’t tell where their target was, or even if he had heard them, but they kept their minds open for a response, which was only a few seconds in coming.

I’d love to, but I’m temporarily indisposed. I’ve been captured and forced into the gladiator games in Tyr. Along with his words came an image of the tohr-kreen standing outside the city’s walls, so absorbed in measuring the northness with his tinkercraft jernan that he didn’t notice the soldiers until they had completely surrounded him.

We’ll come get you out, they told him.

That will be difficult, Kitarak said. *They have four psionics in conjunction at all times to keep me under control. In fact, I’m surprised*

they haven't detec— His voice cut off in midword.

Looks as if they just did. Jedra and Kayan imagined themselves hovering over the city, and within a heartbeat their center of consciousness was there, looking down into the immense gladiator arena at the base of the half-finished ziggurat.

From above, the city of Tyr looked like two colorful plates just barely overlapping. The smaller one held the sorcerer-king's palace and gardens, while the larger one held the ziggurat, the arena, the elven market and the merchant district, and every kind of dwelling from nobles' houses to the warrens to the slave pits. Streets provided the cracks, like crazing in the glaze of a much-used piece of pottery.

Fitting, Jedra and Kayan thought when they saw the likeness, for despite the enormous ziggurat still under construction in the middle of it, Tyr was an old city. They focused their attention on the slave pits—the deep excavation into which the king's captives were herded when they weren't fighting or working on the ziggurat—but they didn't see any sign of a tohr-kreen among the milling mass of unfortunate humans and demihumans. They checked the arena itself, but no games were being fought today and Kitarak wasn't among the dozen or so gladiators practicing in the dusty red field. He wasn't among the myriad slaves toiling on the ziggurat, either.

They did see signs of the other psionicists Kitarak had mentioned. There were hundreds of them, though. Around the slave pits and the practicing gladiators and in a few other places throughout town, bubbles of darkness showed up in their psionic vision. They were shields, through which Kayan and Jedra's power could not reach. Presumably they were suppression fields similar to the one Kitarak had used on them when they had fought just before he left. Psionics wouldn't work inside the fields, which allowed the slave masters to keep their captives in line even if they had psionic powers of their own.

Considering Kitarak's talents, his captors would need a powerful suppression field. Jedra and Kayan scanned the city for one, blanking out as much of the other detail as they could until the city itself was a mere shadow, and when they did that their target became obvious. High on the

hill on which the nobles had built their mansions rested a single intense sphere of blackness. That was good news. Kitarak would get better treatment from a noble than from the sorcerer-king or any of his templars. But even so, slavery was slavery; Jedra and Kayan weren't about to let him remain captive.

Assuming Kitarak was inside the suppression-field bubble.

Let's look at it in regular light, Jedra suggested, and the estates themselves grew more substantial. The one that housed the force bubble was built like a miniature version of the city itself. A twenty-foot-high wall ran all around a cluster of low stone buildings, all of which in turn encircled a two-story dwelling built of wood. Whoever had captured Kitarak was rich even for a noble, wood was the most expensive building material in Athas. The mansion was big enough to contain an open courtyard in the center, in which two tall trees provided shade and over which the inner rooms looked. Observation towers rose from the outside corners of both the mansion and the outer wall enclosing the grounds, and two guards armed with crossbows waited at constant alert atop each tower. Evidently the noble who owned all this was as paranoid as he was rich.

Ah, the price of success, Kayan said with amusement, but she and Jedra were anything but amused when they realized that they would have to get past those guards somehow. Not to mention the dozens of others who patrolled the compound on foot, and probably hundreds more inside the bunkhouses. The bubble of force that presumably held Kitarak had disappeared beneath the roof of one of the low buildings at the rear of the compound. That was probably the gladiators' quarters, judging by the bloodstained practice field in front of it. Jedra and Kayan lowered their viewpoint until they could see in through the barred windows, and sure enough there was Kitarak, bound in chains by all four arms and linked to an enormous bolt that ran completely through the back wall. Two other slaves—a human man and an elven woman—were also chained to the wall. The prisoners had enough chain to allow them to sit or lie down on their cots, but no more.

The four psionicsists guarding them—two young women and two bored-looking old men, one of them elven—sat in comfortable chairs across the building’s single room. That could explain how Jedra and Kayan had reached Kitarak and how he had managed to reply before they had stopped him. His guards had been too relaxed, saving their energy for when they needed it, but they were alert now.

Kitarak didn’t see them looking in, for there was nothing there to see. Their bodies were still back at his house in the canyon. The psionicsists might detect their presence if they looked, but they were worried about trouble from Kitarak, not from outside. Jedra and Kayan could take advantage of that. They slipped around to the back of the house to where the bolt in the wall stuck out through the stone. A large iron washer and a nut held it in place. Jedra and Kayan concentrated their telekinetic power on the nut, but it was rusted tight, and they couldn’t muster enough force at such a long distance to budge it. Nor could they affect anything inside the building at all; the suppression field stopped their power as well as Kitarak’s.

We’ll have to get closer so our power will be stronger, Jedra said as they withdrew so as not to alert the psionicsists to their presence.

They rose up until they could see the entire city again, memorizing the location of the noble’s estate. If they came in through the city’s main gate, the caravan gate, it would be high to their left.

They had seen what they came to see. Every moment they stayed linked was costing them energy, so with the speed of thought they returned to Kitarak’s house, and without pausing this time, they broke their link. They sagged back onto their chairs, tired and suddenly depressed.

“What were we thinking?” Jedra asked, leaning back and holding his hand to his forehead. “We can’t just march into Tyr and break Kitarak out of an armed estate. We’re strong, but we’re not invincible.”

“No,” Kayan said, “but we are responsible.”

“What do you mean?” He looked across the table to see Kayan staring at the arched stone roof.

She said, "I mean we're morally obligated to try. Kitarak left the safety of his own home because of us."

Jedra nodded. "That's true." He took a deep breath and straightened up. "But we won't do him any good if we don't have a plan."

"Then let's get busy and make one."

They finished the entire pot of stew while they plotted a three-pronged attack. First they would create a diversion, to draw the bulk of the soldiers away from the slave quarters. They would use Kayan's medical power to sicken anyone who remained so they couldn't fight, and then they would use telekinesis to knock down the slave quarters. The psionic guards would prevent the falling rubble from harming themselves or their charges, but while their power was being used for that, they would be vulnerable to mental attack. If Jedra and Kayan let Kitarak know who was responsible for the commotion, he would undoubtedly join in and help overpower the guards, and then the three of them could make their escape.

"What if they move him?" Jedra asked.

Kayan got up and took her bowl to the sink. "Then we modify the plan at the time."

"What if the psionics are stronger than we are?"

"*Nothing* is stronger than we are," she said, washing out the bowl with water from the jug. "They might have better control, but this doesn't require a lot of precision."

Jedra took his bowl and the stew pot over to the sink and held them upside down, then telekinetically pulled the debris from them and dropped it into the drain. He was uncomfortable with her degree of confidence, but he supposed she might be right at that. They had slammed a cloud ray to the ground and leveled an entire city by accident; they should be able to handle four distracted psionics.

Even so, he shuddered when he thought about it. Kitarak's training hadn't affected one thing: Jedra still hated fighting, no matter how good the odds.

* * *

They left at first light the next morning. They had loaded their backpacks with supplies, but they were supplies for surviving in a city, not for crossing the desert. To do that they held on to each other tightly, joined minds again, and levitated up out of the canyon, then redirected the wind to blow them across the sky toward Tyr.

The view from the sky was exhilarating. Actually being there was somehow more exciting than leaving their bodies on the ground and peeking at things through psionic vision. They flew high enough to reach cool air, and from that altitude the canyonlands passed beneath them like a wrinkled blanket sliding off a bed. The deepest valleys held patches of greenery at the bottoms, and some were obviously inhabited.

Tyr slid up from below the horizon like a blotch on the land. First came the pall of dust and smoke hanging over it, then came the city itself, its hills and towers and the dominating ziggurat ringed all around by a great stone wall. Jedra and Kayan lowered themselves to the ground when they were still a few miles out so they wouldn't attract attention, and walked over a low ridge to join the caravan road linking it to the other cities of Athas. As they approached the road they encountered a steady stream of people, but instead of the usual comings and goings around a city, everyone was headed inward. They didn't stop at the main gate, either, but veered off to the right around the fields.

"What's all the excitement?" Jedra asked one of the other walkers. He was an old man in a threadbare gray cloak, leaning heavily on a wooden staff held in his right hand.

"Don't you know?" the man asked incredulously. He cackled in glee and said, "It's game day, boy!"

"Game day?" Jedra asked, but a sinking feeling in his stomach told him all he needed to know. "Gladiator games?"

"Of course gladiator games!" The man thumped his staff on the ground. "You don't think I'd come all the way into town just to see somebody run a

footrace, do you? Blood and guts! Brains on the sand! Yessir, that's entertainment."

Jedra paled. It wasn't *his* idea of fun, but he tried to put on an eager expression all the same. This would provide the perfect opportunity to enter the city without being noticed.

He and Kayan fell in beside the old man, who hobbled along on his good leg and his prop for the next half mile or so, but as they drew closer to the city his pace began to speed up and his staff barely touched the ground. "Hee hee," he cackled. "I'm like a kank headed to the barn! It does my old bones good to watch a gladiator get whacked. Nothing like it to get the juices flowing."

Jedra didn't ask whose juices he meant. He didn't bother to correct the man, either, but he suspected that Kayan had a lot more to do with the old codger's sudden spryness than any amount of bloodlust.

They rounded the right flank of the city, walking through grain fields and vegetable patches tended by slaves belonging to the various noble houses. The slaves lined the road, ostensibly guarding their masters' crops from the hordes of people, but Jedra noticed some of them selling produce to the passersby. He dug into his pack and took out the money pouch he had carried all the way from the slave caravan, sifted through it until he found a broken-off tenth-bit of ceramic coin, and bought a greenish melon from a woman who nonetheless assured him it was ripe.

"You got gypped," the old man said when he returned with the melon, but Jedra suspected he was merely put out that Jedra hadn't bought one for him as well. He didn't particularly care who ate the thing; he had bought it for looks.

The guards at the stadium gate paid no special attention to the three of them as they passed into the city. When asked their business, the old man said, "We're here t'see the games," and Jedra held up the melon to back him up.

"Don't throw that," one guard said, laughing. "You'll kill someone with that hard thing." But he let them through the gate. Just inside, hordes of merchants had set up booths and were hawking wares of all sorts to the

even larger horde of spectacle-goers. The old man harumphed and grumbled his way past the jewelry and clothing stands, complaining bitterly about the poor craftsmanship and high prices. He sloshed his own waterskin gleefully at the water vendors and paused at the fruit stands only to malign the quality of the produce, but when he reached the barbecue pits he stopped and inhaled the greasy smoke as if it were the sweetest perfume.

He looked to Jedra. “Buy me a slab of that, boy, and I’ll show you and your girl the best seats in the stadium.”

Jedra wasn’t sure he wanted the best seats, but if Kitarak were forced to fight today, he supposed a good view would be essential to helping him. How they could do that he didn’t know, but they would have to try. So he bought the old man a greasy slice off a barbecued mekillot haunch that looked big enough to feed the entire city for a week, and they proceeded into the stadium.

Pike-wielding ushers directed them up into the top section of seats. Jedra thought at first that they were getting preferential treatment until he realized that the upper section provided shade for the lower one, which was closer to the floor of the arena. That suited him fine, though. As long as he could see, he didn’t care to be close enough to smell the action as well. The old man led them up into the crowd, stepping on toes and nudging people aside with his staff as he climbed, eventually choosing a section of stone bench halfway up the stands and two-thirds of the way down from the palace toward the ziggurat.

“What’s so special about these seats?” Jedra asked.

The old man bit into the meat Jedra had bought him, chewed, and said around the mouthful, “I told you I’d *show* you the best seats. So there they are.” He pointed to the rows of balconies overlooking the stadium from the eastern wall of the palace, on the side of the stadium opposite the ziggurat. Gaily dressed templars and those nobles who were currently in favor with the sorcerer-king lined the balconies, ignoring the crowds below while they dined and drank before the games began.

The old man cackled at his own joke. “These, on the other hand, are the best that were left, and that’s the truth. We’ll still see plenty from here.” He

took another bite, letting the grease and sauce drip off the end of his grizzled chin.

Cart you believe this guy? Kayan asked, resting her head against Jedra's shoulder.

I'd be afraid to, Jedra replied. He gave Kayan a hug. He could sense her unease in this crowd. The last time she had been in a city, she had been among the templars. Jedra was used to life among the rabble, but Tyr was a strange city and knowing why he and Kayan were here made him even more nervous.

The crowd grew around them until the stadium was nearly full. The noise of thousands of conversations blended into a continual roar, much like the roar of the city Jedra had discovered in the second crystal world. Occasional fights broke out among spectators who couldn't wait for the action to start below, but the ushers quickly quelled them. The threat of their pikes put a peaceful stop to most disagreements, but they had to yank one drunken brawler up to the top of the stands and toss him over the side to break up one fight. The crowd roared its approval, then roared even louder when they turned back around and saw the crier walking out into the middle of the arena.

The crier raised his hands, and a hush settled over the crowd. He spoke, welcoming everyone to the games and announcing the first combatants, but Jedra didn't recognize either name.

The other people in the crowd, however, did. They roared their approval when a swarthy, leather-clad man bearing a club and a short sword climbed up the steps from the pens below the ziggurat and paced out into the middle of the arena, and they roared again when a lithe blonde woman in a breechcloth and halter and carrying a longer sword and a whip stepped out after him. The two took up positions about twenty feet from each other, the man flexing his arms and brandishing his weapons for the audience while the woman just stood there, her whip trailing behind her, ready for action.

"Lookit her!" the old man crowed. "Pale as a ghost. Never spent a day in the sun in her life. It's a shame to waste such a pretty thing, but she

must've crossed somebody important."

Jedra fought to keep himself from throwing up. He'd heard that some gladiator games started with executions, but he'd never imagined that they would throw an untrained woman in the arena against a trained gladiator and make them fight to the death.

At a shout from the crier they sprang into action, and the woman instantly made Jedra realize he'd misjudged her. She lashed out with her whip and cut a gash in the man's hairy chest with her very first blow. The crack echoed across the stands, and the crowd cheered. The man stepped forward as if he hadn't even been hit, his short sword held out vertically before him, but he danced back when the woman flicked the whip toward him again. He leaned in and back, in and back, while she popped at his arms and legs with the lash. A few people booed him for his caution, but the man bided his time, learning the woman's rhythm. Then, in the middle of another motion just like all the others, he sliced out with his sword instead of backing off, and a three-foot piece of whip flew end-over-end over his shoulder.

The woman tried to change her rhythm to match the shorter whip, but it took her a few tries, and by the time she got it right the man had leaped toward her and thrown his club directly at her stomach. She staggered back, stunned, and the man swept in and stabbed her cleanly below her left breast before she could even raise her own sword to guard herself. When he pulled his sword free, bright red blood flooded out over her white belly, running down her leg and dripping to the sand. She looked up at him with wide eyes, then she folded over like a closed book and toppled to the ground.

While the crowd cheered, the gladiator bowed to the king and the templars, then to the stands on both sides of the arena. Then, almost tenderly, he picked up the woman's body and bore it out of the stadium. The way her arms and legs and head dangled limply from his cradling hands haunted Jedra for minutes after—right up until the next bloody execution of an elf who had been given a spear to defend himself against an armored dwarven gladiator with a double-bladed axe. The elf definitely had the reach on the dwarf, but the result was nearly the same. The moment the

dwarf disarmed him, the fight was as good as over. Of course the crowd wasn't satisfied until the dwarf had hacked the elf's head completely free of his body, even though it took three swings to do it.

What will they do to me if I throw up? Jedra asked Kayan.

I don't know, but it probably wouldn't be good, she replied. *Here.* She put her hand over his stomach, and his inner turmoil receded somewhat. The horror he felt at the slaughter still remained, but at least now he wouldn't adorn the spectators around him with his lunch.

Thank you, he said.

Now that he wasn't so focused on his discomfort from the gore, he realized how hot he was. That was easy enough to fix; he used the same talent he had learned to keep Kitarak's cold-box frozen and created a layer of cool air around himself and Kayan. He noticed the old man still sweating freely in the sun and guiltily lowered the temperature a degree or two around him as well. The excess heat had to go somewhere, so he found a particularly unruly fan a few rows below and dumped it on him. The man gasped and fanned himself with a fold of his robe, and sure enough, after a few minutes he quieted down.

There were two more executions, and then the real games started. Professional gladiators entered the arena in pairs and hacked and sliced at each other on the sand below while the people in the stands leaped to their feet and cheered loud enough to drown out the clash of weapons and even the screams when one gladiator wounded another. Each match featured minor variations in sex or species or number of combatants, but they were all essentially the same mindless spectacle. Jedra let his thoughts drift off to run one more time through their plans to break Kitarak free, but his attention snapped back to the crier again the moment he heard the tohr-kreen's name announced.

Straining for the words over the restless crowd, he heard, "...accused of practicing sorcery within the boundaries of the city... sold at auction to the House of Rokur... now does battle with his native weapons, the gythka and the kyorkcha, against the defending champion, the half-giant Dochak of the House of Bran."

The crowd—including the old man—booed when Kitarak stepped out from beneath the ziggurat into the arena. He carried his expanding polearm in his upper left hand and the curved throwing weapon in his upper right, plus two small shields held in his lower hands. He bowed even though he was being booed. The crowd cheered for Dochak, an enormous hulk of sun-darkened flesh who stood taller and outweighed even the ten-foot-high tohr-kreen. Surprisingly, instead of the usual club or spear that half-giants generally used for weapons, this one carried a dejada, a throwing weapon that used a long, scooped basket for a sling to propel a variety of projectiles called pelota. He also carried a small shield in his left hand, the projectile-holding one.

The old man pounded his staff on the bench in excitement. He turned to Jedra and said, “Those long arms of his’ll make those peloters fly faster’n a bee-stung zhackal! Half-giants’re clumsy, though, so the tohr-kreen’s got a chance if he’s quick.”

“Oh, he’s quick,” Jedra assured him, but he was thinking, I hope he’s quick enough.

The crier shouted “Go,” and the battle started. Dochak immediately flung a pelota at Kitarak, who easily raised a shield to fend it off. Kitarak flung his kyorkcha at the half-giant, who raised his own shield. He barely clipped the edge of the spinning blade with it, but that was enough to deflect it and send it flying high into the air. The crowd gasped when it looked as if the weapon would land in the stands, but it curved around and spun back to Kitarak’s outstretched hand.

He’s using psionics, too, Jedra said to Kayan.

It looks like he is. They must let him do a little before they come down on him.

Jedra felt himself relax. If Kitarak could use psionics, then the battle was over already. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly while the half-giant threw a wicked, spiked pelota that stuck dead-center in Kitarak’s right-hand shield, and another that veered away under psionic deflection and bounced with a loud crack off the stone wall below the king and the templars.

Kitarak threw the kyorkcha again, and this time it swooped low beneath the half-giant's shield and sliced deep into his left thigh before spinning around and returning to the tohr-kreen's hand. Dochak bellowed with rage as blood began to run down his leg. Taking advantage of the wound, Kitarak leaped forward, flicking his upper left hand to slide the gythka out to full extension, and brought it down in a blow that would have taken off the half-giant's head if he hadn't managed to shield himself in time. The multibladed hacking end of the polearm thudded into the wood and stuck there. Kitarak tried to wrench it free, but the half-giant reached out and snatched the metal handle before the tohr-kreen could work it loose. With one wrench of his meaty hand the half-giant crumpled the hollow tube and snapped it off, leaving the blade embedded in his shield and leaving Kitarak holding a much-shortened gythka with only the thrusting blade left on the opposite end.

The crowd roared, and Jedra groaned, but Kitarak might have planned it that way all along for all the dismay he showed. He merely whirled the gythka around and lunged past the half-giant's outstretched arms to stab him in the belly.

Dochak staggered back, limping on his wounded leg, but his vital organs were deeper than Kitarak had managed to penetrate. He hardly bled from the new wound. In fact, he acted as if he barely felt it. He loaded his dejada and flung the projectile in one smooth motion, and this time he connected, striking Kitarak in the upper right shoulder joint. Chips of chitinous exoskeleton sprayed out from the impact, and the pelota careened into the lower stands, striking a slave on the head and dropping him like a limp rag.

"That's another reason why these are the good seats," cackled the old man. "We don't have a row of slaves to stand between us and harm's way like the nobles do, so we need time to duck."

Jedra shushed him, his attention riveted on the battle. Kitarak was hurt! His arm had fallen to his side, useless, but he dropped his shield on that side and took the kyorkcha in his lower hand, then flung it at Dochak at the

same close range. The spinning blade nicked the half-giant's neck, and this time blood flowed freely, cascading down over his shoulder and chest.

Kitarak backed off and retrieved the kyorkcha as it completed its circular path. He had to dodge another pelota, but the half-giant's aim and speed weren't what they had been at the start, and the projectile hit the sand behind him and bounced to a stop before it even reached the end of the stadium. The tohr-kreen kept his distance, waiting for the half-giant to bleed to death, but a few people began to shout, "Kill him!" and pretty soon the entire crowd took up the chant. A few pieces of rotten fruit flew over the edge of the balcony toward the tohr-kreen, and the old man even snatched up the melon Jedra had bought and heaved it forward, where it struck the same unfortunate fan that Jedra had overheated.

Jedra didn't care. He was suddenly even more afraid for Kitarak than he had been when the tohr-kreen was injured. A gladiator couldn't ignore such a demand from the crowd, at least not a slave. If he did, his owner would punish him for spoiling the game, probably by handicapping him so severely next time that his death would be certain. Kitarak must have known that too, but still he hesitated, clearly not wanting to strike the final blow. His opponent was dying anyway, though, and at last Kitarak bowed to the crowd's desire: he threw his remaining shield at the half-giant, spinning it edge-on toward his head, and when Dochak swept it aside with his own shield, Kitarak threw both the kyorkcha and the shortened gythka at him. Both weapons thudded home and stuck, the curved kyorkcha sticking out of the half-giant's forehead like a single upraised horn, and the gythka quivering from his breastbone, which it had penetrated clear to the hilt of the blade.

The crowd cheered and stomped their feet. Either blow would have been instantly fatal; Kitarak had redeemed himself in their eyes. Even the old man said, grudgingly, "Not bad for an overgrown bug."

Kitarak bowed to the king as was required of the winner, then retrieved his weapons from the corpse and left the stadium. Jedra stood up and said, "Time to go stretch my legs." To Kayan he said, *Come on, let's get out of here.*

She grinned mischievously and said, *Aw, I was just starting to enjoy it*, but she stood and went along with him.

They left the old man cheering at the next gladiators—a pair of identical twin women fighting a heat-deranged erdlu—and worked their way down out of the stands and through the vendors’ court into the city itself.

* * *

The streets were quiet. Everyone who would normally have been out was at the gladiatorial games, so Jedra and Kayan had the chance to check out Tyr without the normal hustle and bustle. It gave the city a rural feel, more like a large town than a major hub of commerce. The only thing that marred the afternoon’s tranquility was the mountainous hulk of the ziggurat in the center of town. It dominated the skyline, a vast, malign presence that seemed to watch them no matter where they went.

They skirted it to the north, walking through the nearly silent tradesmen’s district and along the edge of the equally deserted warrens before reaching the merchants’ district and the great Caravan Way that led past the nobles’ mansions to the city’s main gate. The open market was still doing business, and Jedra was glad to see that not everyone had abandoned their normal lives to go watch people kill each other for sport. He and Kayan wandered among the stalls, Jedra for the first time in his life with enough money to buy whatever he wanted, but with no place to keep any of it. So they just admired the jewelry and the fine clothing and sniffed at the spices and perfumes from far-off lands.

Toward evening they found an inn called the Dragon’s Tail that served good food, and they ordered a sumptuous meal—the first time Jedra had ever been waited on. They ate broiled cloud ray and drank expensive wine by candlelight, laughing as Jedra levitated his steak a few inches off his plate and made a crashing noise when he let it drop again, spraying vegetables all over the wooden table. He sliced off a bite of the light-colored meat and held it up on his fork. “This is my revenge for that

morning in the elf camp,” he said, and bit into it. “Mmmm.” It was juicy and flaky and tasted almost buttery, a little like the sea bug he had eaten in Yoncalla’s world.

“I wonder if the elves got tired of eating the cloud ray we killed before they moved on,” Kayan said.

“I imagine they did,” answered Jedra. “Hah. That seems like a whole lifetime ago, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does.” Kayan raised her wine glass in toast. “To the Jura-Dai, may they never run afoul of our likes again.”

Jedra wasn’t sure he wanted to toast the tribe that had kicked them out into the desert to die, but he supposed, now that he had survived the ordeal, he could let bygones be bygones. So he raised his glass and said, “May we never run across their likes again, either.” He drained his glass, amazed at how the sweet white wine flowed so smoothly down his throat. He refilled both his and Kayan’s glasses from the bottle and took another swallow.

“Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?” he asked.

“No,” Kayan said. “Why don’t you?”

Jedra laughed. “All right. You’re beautiful. I like the way the candlelight sparkles in your eyes. And I like the way your mouth turns up at the corners when you’re waiting for me to embarrass myself. And I like the way it puckers out when you’re about to kiss me.” He leaned forward and puckered his own lips in exaggerated fashion. She giggled, but she kissed him.

“I like the way your hair falls forward around the sides of your face,” he went on. “It makes you look dark and mysterious.”

“Does it?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What else?”

Jedra laughed. “Let’s see...” He examined her face the way they had examined the vendors’ wares earlier that afternoon, squinting one eye and tilting his head. “Oh, yes, your nose. I like it. It doesn’t look a thing like a beak.”

“Oh, thanks!” Kayan leaned back and drank more wine, trying to hold a scowl.

“And your mind,” Jedra said. “Haven’t I mentioned your mind? I like that, too.”

“Beast!” she said. “You haven’t once mentioned my curvaceous body or my slender legs.”

“I was working my way down. Don’t be so impatient.” They looked at one another for a moment, then both burst into laughter.

The innkeeper, a thin, tall elf with a perpetual grin of his own, wound his way through the tables to theirs. “Do you need more wine?” he asked.

Jedra shook the bottle, amazed to find the wine nearly gone. “I’d love it,” he said, “but unfortunately I think we’d better keep our wits about us tonight. We have a big night ahead.”

“Ah, I see,” the innkeeper said. “Well, then, enjoy your meal.” He turned away, his smile even wider.

Kayan mindsent, *He thinks we’re going to—to—*The mental picture that came with her thoughts said what she couldn’t bring herself to.

Jedra blushed, but he said, *I’d certainly rather do that than go up against a nobleman’s entire army.*

Kayan appraised him silently, her eyes wide and dark in the dim light. “What, are you nervous?” she asked. He noticed she said it aloud, so he couldn’t tell if she’d intended a double meaning or not.

So he said, “Who wouldn’t be?” and took another bite of cloud ray.

* * *

They emerged from the inn at dusk. A few stars were already showing in the deepening sky, and a glow in the east promised a moon before long. Jedra and Kayan didn’t plan to wait for it. They wouldn’t need the extra light once they were mindlinked, and the darkness might help. They hiked up the hill on which the Rokur estate stood, trying to look like slaves

returning home after a long day in the fields. They would have tried looking like nobles, but Jedra would have failed miserably at that, and Kayan had at least a little experience being a slave.

They found the compound easily enough; the landmarks they had memorized from their psionic inspection guided them directly there. Finding a secluded spot from which they could work proved more difficult, but they finally found a dark corner in the servants' alley that led to the back entrance of the compound, not far from the point in the wall nearest Kitarak's quarters.

As they squeezed into the shadows, which Jedra expanded with his light-manipulating ability, Kayan mindsent, *This is exactly the sort of place the innkeeper expected us to wind up tonight, isn't it?*

Something like this, Jedra admitted. He was definitely nervous now, and not because of Kayan's proximity. He touched the crystal he wore around his neck for luck, took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then took Kayan's hands in his own. *Let's do it before I get too scared*, he said.

Yes, let's, she said. *Here goes*. She leaned forward to kiss him, and at the same time as their lips touched, so did their minds. *Mmmm*. They separated their consciousness from their bodies and drifted through the wall. *This is a good start*.

That was practically the last thing that went right for them. They found Kitarak easily enough, but when they tried to telekinetically loosen the nut holding his restraining bolt to the wall, it resisted until they nearly twisted it off, and then it screeched like a banshee when it finally began to turn. The guards came instantly alert, and Jedra and Kayan had to flee the building to avoid being detected. They watched through their psionic vision from across the weapons practice field while dark tendrils of psionic force wove out into the night, seeking the source of the sound, but eventually the psionicists gave up and pulled back inside.

Jedra and Kayan slid back toward the building and peeked through the barred window. Kitarak and one of the other slaves—the human—were sitting up on their cots while the four psionicists faced them from their

chairs, their eyes half-closed in deep concentration. The elf woman wasn't in the building.

Even with their eyes closed, the two old men looked more interested than they had last night. They and the younger women were definitely on alert. Jedra and Kayan could see the dark bubble of the psionic suppression field surrounding the prisoners, and a lighter, wider bubble of awareness surrounding the whole building. If they disturbed that, the psionicists would know they were there.

We'll just have to break the chains when we push over the building, Jedra said. *All right, then, time for the diversion.*

They rose up over the estate, looking for the best way to distract the largest number of soldiers. They could see where most of them were: relaxing in and around their own quarters after a long day. Some polished weapons, some played dice or card games, others simply sat outside in the cooling air and watched the sky change color. A few still stood guard in the towers in the main house and along the wall, and a few patrolled the compound as well.

The nobles who owned the estate were in their wooden house's central courtyard, lying in cool net hammocks while servants plied them with food and drink.

Maybe we can take care of them all at once, Kayan suggested when they saw the situation. The soldiers' quarters were built of square blocks of stone, but the nobles house had been built of wood to show off their wealth. And wood burned...

They started the fire in an empty dining room on the corner of the house farthest from Kitarak's slave quarters. It took much more effort to get it going than they had expected; evidently the wood had been magically protected against fire. The latent spell was no match for Jedra and Kayan's combined strength, however, and soon the fire grew to fill the entire room and smoke boiled out the open windows.

It didn't take long for someone to notice. The guards in the tower directly over the fire cried out in alarm at the first whiff of smoke, and the entire estate suddenly became a frenzy of motion. Soldiers ran from their

barracks and servants boiled out of every outbuilding, most of them carrying water-soaked cloths or heavy leather hides for beating out the flames. They leaped in through the windows and doors, heedless of the smoke and flame, and flailed away at the fire until they had it nearly under control.

They've practiced this, Jedra said. *Well, let's give them more.* They moved through the mansion, setting fire after fire, straining against the magical protection spell with each one. Simply exciting the wood into flame with their own power proved too taxing to sustain, so they switched tactics, borrowing heat from the air and pouring it back into the wood. It was the same technique Kitarak used to keep his food cold, and it had the same effect: flakes of snow began to fall over the burning mansion.

That proved more distraction than the fire. Everyone outside stopped to stare up in wonder and feel the cold flakes melt on their outstretched palms, while the people inside screamed at them to come help with the fire. Jedra and Kayan kept it up for another few minutes, manipulating the crackling sound and flickering light of the fires to make explosions and lightning flashes and phantom attackers rushing out of the shadows to confuse the scene even more, then they abandoned the building and the servants and soldiers to their fate.

The soldiers were well trained; not all of them rushed to the fire. The ones in the guard towers stayed put—even the ones atop the burning mansion—and the ones on patrol took up positions near the front and rear gates and along the perimeter wall. Jedra and Kayan used Kayan's medical powers to incapacitate the ones on the side of the compound near Kitarak's quarters, giving them stomach cramps and blinding headaches and dizziness until nobody could move.

Time for step three, Jedra said, moving toward the gladiators' quarters. They peered inside again, cautiously; the psionics had sent feelers out far into the night to warn them of attack. Kitarak and the other slave were lying flat on their cots, evidently knocked out cold to prevent them from attempting to escape.

Kitarak won't be able to help us! Kayan cried in alarm, but it was too late to back down. After the trouble they'd caused, the estate would never again be left so unguarded against psionic attack. They would just have to break Kitarak free by themselves.

There was no point in waiting. With a silent prayer to whatever gods were listening, they gathered their psionic power and shoved against the wall of the gladiators' quarters. The building shuddered under the blow, and slate fell from the roof, but it didn't go over. They hit it again, shattering the entire front wall, but still it didn't go over. Only when they smashed one of the side walls as well did the roof finally begin to crumble and fall in.

The psionics inside thrust it away from them and their unconscious charges, letting the building crack open and fall away on all sides, but that took their combined power to accomplish and while they were doing that Jedra and Kayan struck directly at them. They attacked their convergent link first, trying to break the four psionics apart so they couldn't draw on each other's power. They hadn't learned a direct method from Kitarak for that, so they tried their old visual methods, imagining the link as four ropes tied in a knot and themselves as a spinning *kyorkcha* slicing through the knot. They passed through like a knife through a waterskin, but their passage didn't accomplish quite what they expected. They broke the link all right, but the four psionics each struck back at them individually. Jedra and Kayan felt four separate minds thrust at them, pressing for dominance and battering at their own link.

They could feel themselves slipping apart. *Hold on!* Jedra said, striking out telekinetically at their opponents. He tugged down more roof tiles and flung them at the psionics, striking the old elf on the head and knocking him out. He felt Kayan using her medical skills to stop one of the young women's heart long enough to put her out of the battle, but by then the other two had linked up again and pressed the attack.

Jedra and Kayan's link grew weaker under blow after blow from the other psionics. Jedra tried burning them, he tried blinding them with flashes of enhanced light, he even tried levitating them high into the air and dropping them, but they countered everything he threw at them. He felt the

energy drain as Kayan tried her own specialties on them, but she was no more successful than he.

Then reinforcements arrived. Suddenly instead of two linked minds, there were three, then four again. Jedra thought maybe the two they had knocked unconscious had revived, but then there were five, then six. Their enormously enhanced power beat Jedra and Kayan back, then began to close around them. They didn't attack so much as suppress Jedra and Kayan's abilities, smothering their mindlink the way Kitarak had when he had stopped them from fighting each other back in his house. *Where are they all coming from?* Jedra asked as he fought to keep from being overwhelmed, but he realized the answer as soon as he asked the question. There had to be more of them resting at any given moment in order to keep a continuous guard over Kitarak. As demanding as convergence was, there had to be at least a dozen psionics in the noble's pay.

Quick, break our link and shield ourselves so they can't find us! Jedra told Kayan just as she said, *Quick, try to wake Kitarak so he can help!*

No, they'll catch us! Jedra said, but Kayan was already trying to link with the unconscious tohr-kreen. She managed it, too, and they felt a surge of power as Kitarak woke, but the six combined psionics bore down on them without mercy.

Run! Jedra pleaded, sensing their dark presence in his mind like a giant's hand on his skull.

His panicked mental command had the force of their combined power behind it; Kitarak's alien presence winked out again like a blown-out candle flame, and Kayan receded to the limit of perception. Jedra just had time to note that Kitarak's body had disappeared along with his mind before he felt the psionics press through his mental barrier.

In desperation, he cut the mindlink and found himself back in the alley with Kayan. Her body stood stiffly beside him; she had obviously been captured. He didn't even try to go back after her, he merely wrapped his arms around her body and levitated them both into the air, then pushed off down the alley toward the city center. If he could get some distance between her and the psionics, he might be able to break her free, and then

they could blank their minds and hide in the warrens until they could make their escape.

He didn't even make it to the end of the alley before the psionics struck again. Their tactics were the same as before; his levitation ability cut off in midair, and he and Kayan fell to the ground like a couple sacks of vegetables. Jedra felt a bone in his right leg snap, and pain shot through his whole body, but he struggled to his feet again and tugged at Kayan. There was no place to hide, but he had no other options.

He dragged her a couple of yards, pain lancing through his leg with each step, before he fell to his knees. He kept tugging on Kayan, but a moment later the alley gate banged open and torch-bearing soldiers poured through. They spotted the two fugitives instantly and ran up with swords drawn and ready.

The one in the lead—a heavy woman with soot all over her face and body, placed the point of her sword on Jedra's chest. He felt it dig through his tunic, felt it penetrate the skin beneath, felt it quiver there as her hand shook with fatigue and adrenalin.

"Go ahead," she said, clearly eager for the opportunity to run him through. "Try something."

Jedra looked up along the length of burnished iron, its angled planes reflecting the torchlight, to her face. There was no hint of pity there. To her, he was nothing more than a vandal and a thief in the night.

"Sorry," he said to Kayan. Slowly, with exaggerated caution, he lowered Kayan's limp body to the ground. "I'm sorry," he told her, even though he knew she couldn't hear him.

CHAPTER TEN

The fire had been put out by the time the soldiers dragged Jedra and Kayan back into the compound. The woman who had captured them had made Jedra walk until he collapsed from the pain shooting through his leg, then she had slung his arms over her shoulders and carried him the rest of the way, his toes dragging in the dirt behind her. She dumped him on the ground in front of the demolished gladiators' quarters and directed the soldiers who had been carrying Kayan to drop her there, too.

Two of the psionicists were still there, one of the women and one of the older men, and Jedra immediately felt their minds invading his own. He tried to fight them off, but without Kayan he was no match for them. They crushed his shield without pausing and swept through his unguarded psyche like an invading army. Jedra saw and felt images from his life flashing past as they triggered his memories, searching for his identity and his purpose in attacking them. Finally, when they were satisfied that they'd learned enough, they retreated, putting him to sleep on their way out much the way someone might blow out a candle upon leaving a room.

He woke again to a kick in the ribs. Rough hands hauled him erect before he could react, and he stood blinking in the sudden daylight, balancing on his one good leg while he tried to ignore the pain lancing through his right. It was a little better than he'd remembered it; evidently someone had done some healing work on it during the night, but they hadn't finished the job.

When his eyes focused, he saw a well-dressed nobleman of about fifty years standing before him, his gray hair still wet from his morning bath. He was flanked by two soldiers and a psionicist on either side of him. The psionicists were different ones from the four Jedra had fought last night; these were both middle-aged women. They hadn't made any hostile moves yet, but Jedra could feel their presence hovering near him, ready in case he tried anything. His danger sense also warned him of a threat from behind,

but the soldier holding him had one hand around his neck so he couldn't turn his head to see who or what it was.

Kayan had been hauled to her feet by Jedra's side. She was awake again, but she was being held by the neck as well, so she couldn't do more than roll her eyes in his direction.

The noble spoke in a nasal, but still haughty, voice. "I suppose congratulations are in order. Kitarak did manage to escape in all the confusion. Fortunately, you didn't make it away yourselves, so we'll consider it a fair trade." He didn't wait for a response, but went right on to say, "My first impulse when we caught you was to have you beheaded a quarter inch at a time, but I've decided against that. You do seem somewhat resourceful, and I hate to waste anything valuable. I certainly hope you make good gladiators, though, because you just robbed me of a champion, and you're going to replace him whether you can fight or not."

"Gladiators?" Jedra croaked, his mouth dry.

"Yes, gladiators. Your training will begin immediately, and this will be your master." The noble nodded to someone behind Jedra, and the soldiers holding him and Kayan loosened their grip so they could turn around to see who it was.

Jedra recognized the swarthy, musclebound elf the moment he saw him. "Sahalik!" he exclaimed, his voice rising to a squeak.

Kayan's eyes were wide with shock or terror or both.

"Oh, you already know each other?" the noble asked. "Wonderful. That will make things move along even faster, I'm sure. Sahalik, I leave them in your hands." He turned away and walked toward the soot-blackened mansion, his soldiers following him.

The psionics stayed behind, as did the two soldiers holding Kayan and Jedra. And of course, Sahalik. The big elf grinned his gap-toothed grin and clapped his meaty hands on his new gladiators' shoulders. "We might as well get started," he said gleefully. "If you're going to replace Kitarak, you've got a battle to fight in six days."

* * *

The first “practice” session was every bit as brutal as Jedra had expected it to be. There was no pretense of instruction; while the psionicists kept him from using any of his mental powers against his trainer, Sahalik merely beat Jedra senseless, pummeling the young half-elf with his fists until he could no longer stand, then kicking him in the ribs, back, head, and groin until Jedra had curled into a tight ball of pain. The elf warrior was an expert; he didn’t break any bones, but he left no muscle unbruised. Even so, as soldiers dragged Jedra from the practice field, he found strength enough to say with his bloody tongue and lips, “If you touch Kayan, I’ll rip your heart out with my bare hands.”

Sahalik laughed. “She is mine to do with as I please, half-breed. But I’m not interested in your woman. I’ve got better ways to spend my time now.” He waved an arm toward the two other gladiators who had been locked up with Kitarak, who were now helping rebuild their quarters, and Jedra saw the elf woman stop work and wave back at him. She was tall, with light skin, long blond hair, and slender arms and legs. She was no doubt the model of beauty among elves, but Jedra thought she looked like a sun-bleached stick.

Sahalik called out to her, “Shani, come here.” While she laid down her tools and trotted over to the practice field, Sahalik said to Jedra, “You need not worry about me. Shani will train Kayan.”

Sure enough, as the soldiers dragged Jedra off the field and the psionicists began to heal his wounds for the next session, he watched the elf woman batter Kayan the same way Sahalik had beaten him. Kayan got in a few good licks of her own, bloodying Shani’s nose with one lucky punch, but Shani soon got the better of her. It wasn’t long before the soldiers dragged Kayan over to the edge of the field and laid her on her back beside Jedra.

He was just on the edge of blacking out from the pain. The noble’s psionicists were experts at healing the damage to his body without dulling his senses first, so he felt the agony of every injury again as they repaired it,

but they were also expert at keeping him from escaping into unconsciousness. He wondered if they would allow him to mindspeak with Kayan. Maybe if he tried they would knock him out.

Are you all right? he sent.

Fine, she sent back, the sarcasm dripping from the single word. *But I'd be a lot better if you hadn't bungled our escape.*

Me? he said, nearly forgetting his pain in his surprise. *I didn't bungle our escape. You wouldn't let me try until it was too late.*

Oh, so it's my fault we were captured?

Well, it certainly isn't mine!

The psionics chose that moment to clamp down on their exchange. Jedra felt their shield fill his mind like water filling a glass, forcing out any other contact. "Let me speak," he said aloud.

One of the psionics, the older of the two women, said, "You can talk all you want to out loud, but you'll limit your use of psionics to the battlefield. We won't have you plotting an escape right under our noses."

So, they hadn't heard his and Kayan's exchange; they had only sensed that they were mindspeaking. Kitarak's training had evidently paid off in that respect, at least; they weren't broadcasting for all to hear anymore. That was something to remember for later, if they ever *did* find a chance to plan an escape.

Kayan mumbled between puffed, bleeding lips, "You mean I could have used psionics against that elf bitch?"

The woman laughed. "No, we wouldn't have let you do that, not in practice. But use everything you've got when you fight in the arena. There's only one prize for second place in the games."

She looked like a kindly mother giving her daughter a good piece of advice, and her cheery tone of voice added to the illusion, but she was talking about death. And Jedra and Kayan were both still in pain—pain the psionics could have masked with a thought.

"How can you do this to people?" he gasped. "You've been in our minds. You know what it feels like."

“Yes, we do,” the younger psionist said. “And now so do you. You know how much pain you can take and still function. That’s the most important lesson any gladiator can learn. It will keep you from giving up when you could still fight on.”

“Great,” Jedra said. “Now I know, so could you please make it go away?”

The younger one shook her head. “No. You need to know how long you can stand it.”

* * *

That, it turned out, would be for the rest of his life, or so it seemed. For the next three days Jedra was in constant pain, from his partially healed leg to the bruises that Sahalik kept fresh during each practice session.

There were three sessions per day, some with weapons and some with bare hands, and during each one the burly elf did everything he could to humiliate Jedra as well as beat him senseless. When they fought with blunted wooden swords Sahalik slid around behind him and spanked him with the flat of his blade, and when they fought with spears Sahalik tripped him up and poked at him like a curious boy pokes with a stick at a dead animal.

“You’re pathetic,” the elf told him during one practice when they were using clubs. “You couldn’t fight a one-legged blind man with one arm tied behind his back.”

“I don’t want to fight a one-legged blind man,” Jedra gasped, his breath having momentarily fled from an attack to the solar plexus. “I don’t want to fight *anybody!*”

“No, I don’t suppose you do,” Sahalik said, swinging his club almost casually at Jedra’s head. Jedra ducked, but not soon enough to keep Sahalik’s blow from grazing his scalp and leaving another bruise. “You are a coward. That’s too bad, because you’re going to have to fight anyway, and it’s always easier when you enjoy it.”

A few yards away, Kayan shouted in pain as the elf woman, Shani, hit her just as badly.

“Enjoy it?” Jedra demanded angrily. “How can anybody enjoy causing someone else pain?” Sweat ran into his eyes, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

“Oh, that’s easy. The same way you enjoyed making a fool out of me in front of my tribe,” Sahalik said. He swung his club at Jedra again, and though Jedra blocked the blow—no, *parried* it, he reminded himself—the vibration in the wood made his hand go suddenly numb.

“I didn’t enjoy making a fool of you,” Jedra said. “I was trying to keep you from killing me, that’s all.”

“By humiliating me instead,” Sahalik said, knocking Jedra’s club from his hand. “You and your woman. You must have gotten quite a laugh when I fled from my own tent.”

Jedra remembered the tension of that night, and the tribe’s fear and anger when Sahalik didn’t return the next morning. Nobody had laughed. And if Sahalik didn’t know that...

“You didn’t go back,” Jedra said incredulously, not even reaching for his club. “You were afraid they’d laugh at you, so you just left the whole tribe to fend for themselves.”

Sahalik didn’t answer him. He swung his club at Jedra’s legs, but Jedra saw it coming and jumped back.

“You idiot!” he shouted. “They needed you. You were going to be their next chief! And you abandoned them because you were afraid they’d *laugh* at you? Do you know what happened after you left?”

“I don’t care,” Sahalik said, but he was lying and Jedra knew it.

“They were attacked by a cloud ray.” Jedra didn’t mention who had called it down on them. He danced around admitting that just as he’d danced away from Sahalik’s club. “Kayan and I fought it off,” he said, “but one of your warriors was nearly killed and practically everything the tribe owned was destroyed. When we left them, they looked worse than that caravan you sacked.” “You lie,” Sahalik said, swinging for Jedra’s head

again, but this time Jedra ducked fast enough. He picked up his own club while he was down and brought it up between Sahalik's legs. The elf howled and jumped back, and Jedra swung again, hitting him a solid blow in his left side.

Jedra didn't know what had happened to him, only that the elf had made him angrier than he'd been in months. Physical pain hadn't driven him to fight back, but Sahalik's hypocrisy and arrogance had finally done the trick. He flailed away on his tormentor with his club, beating him on his legs and chest and even his back as the elf twisted away from his blows, and all the while he shouted, "You call *me* a coward? You're the coward. You're afraid of *laughter*." He brought his club down against the elf's left leg with his last shout, and he heard the sharp crack of the leg bone breaking.

Instantly, Jedra felt himself gripped by invisible hands. His club flew away, tumbling end over end across the practice field, and the dark presence of the psionic guards filled his mind. Sahalik sat down heavily and clutched at his leg, then he tilted his head back and screamed in rage and pain. Jedra expected the elf to get back up and batter his head to a pulp now that the psionicists held him immobile, but instead the elf motioned for them to let Jedra go. He looked up at Jedra while he waited for them to come heal his injury, and he said through clenched teeth, "I think there may be some fight in you after all. Good. If you remember what that felt like when you fight your first real battle, you may even survive it."

"I don't want to fight," Jedra told him again.

"Too bad," Sahalik said, "because you're going to in three days."

* * *

That night, Kayan whispered to him from her bunk in their newly rebuilt quarters, "That was stupid. Now he'll just beat you even harder." It was the first time she had spoken to him on her own initiative since they'd been captured. They practiced separately by day, and on their previous

nights, when she and Jedra might have at least taken some comfort from snuggling close to each other, she had preferred to sulk alone on her bunk, ignoring him.

Now he wasn't sure which was worse, but he said, "It doesn't matter. We'll be dead soon enough anyway."

"Not if I have anything to do with it we won't," she answered. "If we can use psionics in the arena, we'll win against anything they throw at us."

"Unless we have to fight other psionics," Jedra said.

"We'll win against them, too."

"Yeah, that's what you said when we went up against these guys." Jedra nodded toward the psionics who guarded them—just two, rather than the four that had been required to hold Kitarak. It didn't take all four to suppress their partially trained abilities; as long as they kept Jedra and Kayan from merging, two could handle them easily. It was a clear lesson to the would-be escapees: Sheer power didn't matter nearly as much as the ability to control it.

The psionics had changed shifts again. The two old men hardly seemed to be paying attention—they were playing dice and laughing at jokes—but Jedra could feel their presence hovering over him, and he knew they would respond instantly if he and Kayan even mindspoke to one another.

Kayan glared at him. "You keep trying to make it my fault."

"No, I don't!" Jedra glared back at her. "I'm just tired of hearing about how invincible we are when we're not."

"All right, all right, we're weaklings and we're going to die in our very first battle, is that what you want to hear?"

Does that make you happy?"

"Of course not." Jedra rattled the chains that bound him by his left leg to the wall. "But it's closer to the truth."

Shani never slept in the gladiators' quarters—she evidently spent her nights with Sahalik—but the human, a man in his thirties with just a touch of gray in his hair, did. He'd ignored Jedra and Kayan completely until now,

practicing separately with Sahalik and sleeping whenever he wasn't training or eating, but now he lifted his head up from his bunk and said, "You two are going to make a great team in the arena. I pity your opponents; they're going to get argued to death." Then he rolled over and began to snore.

Jedra was in the bunk between him and Kayan. He looked over at her, ready to share a good laugh, but his grin died when he saw the angry look on her face. Maybe the antisocial slave was right.

* * *

Sahalik, at least, seemed to think that they had a chance. The next day he and Shani took Kayan and Jedra out onto the practice field together and taught them fighting strategy.

"You'll be up against a dwarf named Lothar," he told them. "He fights with a curved sword, sharpened on both sides. Given your little display yesterday, Jedra, I think we'll give you a club, and Kayan, you'll have a spear." He tossed their weapons to them. Jedra's club was presumably the very one he would use in the arena, but Kayan's spear was only a shaft of wood with a rag tied around the end.

Shani carried the curved sword, also made of wood. "Pretend she's shorter and slower," Sahalik said, laughing. "You will fight and I will watch, and when I shout 'stop' I want you to freeze, and we'll examine what you're doing right or wrong. The basic idea is for Kayan to keep Lothar busy with the spear while Jedra beats him to death with the club, and if he gets too close, Jedra drives him back until Kayan can use the spear on him. Neither of you are to throw your weapon, and no fair spearing him in a vital spot until the crowd gets enough blood to be satisfied. Clear?"

"Whose blood?" Jedra asked.

Sahalik laughed again. "Anybody's blood," he said. "They're not choosy." He stepped back and shouted, "Go!"

Shani immediately leaped at Jedra and slashed at him with her curved sword. He jumped back, but not far enough, and the blunted edge caught

him on the forearm as he raised his club to ward off the blow.

“Stop!” Sahalik shouted, and Shani froze. Jedra and Kayan froze a moment later, Jedra with his club still upraised, Kayan with the spear aimed somewhere between Shani and Jedra.

“You’ve just lost your right arm,” Sahalik said. “And Kayan, you’re about to spear your own companion in the side when he jumps back from the blade. All right, try it again.”

They ran through the mock battle dozens of times, but never got beyond the first few seconds before Sahalik stopped them and pointed out another flaw in their strategy. By the end of the session, Jedra had a score of new bruises from the blunt sword, and his head felt overstuffed with all the advice he’d received.

They just had time to eat and catch their breath before they were at it again. This time Sahalik concentrated on *their* attacks, showing them how to harry Shani from two sides and disarm her.

“What about psionics?” Kayan asked at one point. “If we can use that in the battle, then why don’t I just stop her heart—well, the dwarf’s heart,” she said with a wicked grin at Shani, “and be done with it?”

“Two reasons,” Sahalik said. “One, that way isn’t bloody enough for the crowd, and two, you won’t be allowed to. You’ll be handicapped by the temple psionics to whatever level they decide is fair. We won’t know what they’ll allow you until you get into the arena, but don’t count on much. Maybe the ability to dull your own pain, or boost your stamina if you start to fade too soon, but with two against one they’re not going to let you have psionic weapons, too.”

“But—” Kayan turned around, looking across the field at their psionic guards. “I thought we could use whatever we wanted on the battlefield.”

Shani said in a soft, sinister voice, “Oh, that could be arranged. Of course, then you’d be fighting even more capable opponents on both the physical *and* the psionic level. Is that what you want?”

Kayan shuddered. “No,” she said. She seemed to shrink a little, her former bravado completely gone now.

“Cheer up,” Sahalik said, slapping her on the back with enough force to make her stagger. “Lothar’s about as psionic as a rock. If you can give him a hangnail with your mental powers, it’s better than he can do to you.”

Kayan nodded. “That’s a relief,” she said, but she didn’t sound sincere.

* * *

The next two days they practiced with thick leather armor that Sahalik said would stop all but the hardest sword blow, though the scores of cuts in it and the dark bloodstains around them didn’t lend Jedra a whole lot of confidence. It did at least soften the blows from Shani’s mock sword, even when she gave it all her strength. Sahalik also gave Jedra a small round shield to defend himself with while he bludgeoned her with his club. He gradually lost his fear of her weapon, and began to fight back like a true gladiator.

Kayan jabbed and swung her spear as directed, but the fire had gone out of her eyes after Sahalik’s unwelcome news about their limitations. She hardly spoke to Jedra, on the practice field or in the evenings.

The day of the games dawned like any other on Athas: hot and sunny. Jedra was awake long before dawn, though, going over everything Sahalik had taught him time and time again. He didn’t feel ready to face a hurrum beetle—the harmless humming pet of the rich—much less an armed, intelligent dwarf.

He reminded himself that he was the same half-elf who had killed a wild b’rohng in the desert with no weapons other than a carnivorous cactus, but that didn’t help much. It only made him wonder if there were hidden traps in the arena. But surely Sahalik would have warned him, wouldn’t he?

He didn’t know. Sahalik seemed genuinely interested in having his charges win their first battle, but that could all be an act. He could be laughing uproariously inside at the thought of sending them into the arena unprepared.

No. Jedra was being paranoid. Wasn’t he?

He hoped the dwarf, Lothar, was psyching himself out the same way, but Jedra doubted if he was. The few dwarves he had seen before weren't imaginative enough to worry about something ahead of time. Even so, how could Jedra bring himself to kill another intelligent being? He didn't know if he could do it.

Shortly after dawn he and Kayan and the two other gladiators were given a hearty steak breakfast, then marched down the hill to the stadium. People cheered as they passed and shouted encouraging things like, "Tear their guts out!" or "Die with glory!" Jedra tried not to throw up on anybody, but it was hard without Kayan's help.

As participants, they went in through their own gate on the city side of the ziggurat, through a torch-lit corridor beneath the immense stone mass to the cool subterranean pens beneath its arena-facing edge. As the holding area filled with people, though, it soon heated up even there, and the stink of the sweaty, unwashed gladiators, at least half of them afraid for their lives, soon became nauseating.

It seemed like they waited forever for the stands to fill and the games to start, but when the king stepped to his balcony and the crier took his cue to announce the first contestants, Jedra suddenly wished it had taken longer. As a new and unpredictable team, he and Kayan were up fifth, right after the executions.

They couldn't see the battles from their holding pens. The voluntary gladiators could, but not the slaves. They could only wait in the pit and listen to the clash of weapons and the roar of the crowd. Jedra grew more nervous by the minute as one execution after another sped past, and when he took Kayan's hand in his she didn't pull away.

"We'll survive this," he told her.

"Why?" she asked him. "Just to fight again next week?"

"We're buying time," Jedra said. "We'll eventually find a way out of here. Maybe Kitarak will come back for us."

"Hah. He's too smart to put himself in this situation twice."

Jedra was about to protest, but the crowd cheered as the final execution drew to its inevitable close, and Sahalik stuck his head over the railing and said, “All right, you two. You’re on.”

Guards led them up the stairs to the packed sand floor just inside the arena entrance. Bright sun streamed in from beyond. Lothar the dwarf stood there in stark silhouette, wearing a few plates of kank-chitin armor over his chest, legs, and forearms. He looked them over appraisingly as they approached him, taking in their worn leather armor over every vital part of their bodies—armor that did nothing to mask their terror—then he smiled. He had only one tooth sticking down from the top.

“Give me a good fight,” he said. “Make me look good, and I’ll kill you quick and clean.”

Jedra’s mouth was too dry to answer. He clutched at his lucky crystal. He should have bought a real luck charm from a mage in the market when he had the chance, but it was too late now. Sahalik handed him his club and shield, gave Kayan her spear, and shoved them out into the arena. His last words to them were, “Remember to bow to the king when you win.”

“Right,” Jedra said. They hadn’t received any instructions for what to do if they lost—Lothar would no doubt take care of all that needed to be done.

The sand was hot even through his sandals. He squinted to see against the glare from the ziggurat and the stadium. The stands were full of people, but they all blended into a single seething mass of bodies. The only recognizable figures were the crier in the middle of the arena and the guards, both military and psionic, who stood at regular intervals all around the edge. Jedra felt the psionics’ presence hovering over him, ready to smother any attempt he made to escape or to use his own power to win the battle.

The noise of the crowd seemed to weigh down on him almost as hard as the psionics did. The hot, red sun also beat down on him, and the odor of blood from the previous battles filled his nostrils. He was aware of Kayan walking out into the middle of the arena beside him, but at the same

time he seemed completely alone, facing the entire world aligned against him.

Then Lothar stepped out of the gate, and the crowd cheered twice as loud as before. He walked up to within a few paces of Jedra and Kayan, his sword held casually in his right hand. The crier moved off a few yards, then shouted, “Begin!”

Lothar jumped forward, his sword suddenly a blur, and swung the blade toward Kayan’s left side. It chunked into her leather armor and stuck for a moment, but he pulled it free and swung at her again. She brought the shaft of her spear down on his head, and Jedra swung at his exposed back with his club, and both weapons struck just as his sword hit her in the same side again. That was where the laces were tied; his second cut sliced the seam wide open and exposed her entire left side.

“Look out!” Jedra shouted, lunging forward with his club for another blow, but the dwarf had already jumped out of his reach.

“I *am* looking out,” Kayan said. “You’re supposed to hit him!”

“I’m *trying*.” Jedra swung again at Lothar, but at the same moment he saw the dwarf’s blade slice toward his head. He got his shield up in time and blocked the blow, and even managed to connect with his club against Lothar’s armor, but it did no harm.

The dwarf was fast with his sword. Jedra barely had time to leap back before a sudden onslaught, and if it weren’t for his shield and armor he would have been cut to ribbons within seconds. He dodged to the side, but Lothar was already there.

He tried pushing the dwarf aside psionically, or at least slowing his sword arm, but he felt the arena’s judges smother his power before he even had a chance to ruffle Lothar’s hair. He tried blinding him with amplified light, then tried to heat the dwarf’s sword hilt until Lothar had to drop it, but none of his abilities could reach through the shields the judges kept around him. He and Kayan were going to have to win this fight with club and spear.

“Don’t just stand there, jab him!” he yelled at her.

“I would if you’d stay out of the way!” she shouted back as she jabbed at the dwarf. “Quit jumping around so much!”

“He’s got a sword! I’m not letting him slice me with it just so you can get a clear shot. Spear him!”

The crowd had grown quiet, waiting for a bloody wound to cheer, but Jedra’s and Kayan’s words brought laughter from a few people close enough to hear them.

“Fight!” the dwarf hissed. “They laugh at you!”

“What do you think we’re trying to do?” Jedra demanded, swinging his club at Lothar’s legs. He connected that time, and knocked the surprised dwarf’s feet out from under him.

Kayan stabbed at him with her spear, but the point stuck in his belly armor and did no damage. Jedra leaped forward and clubbed him on the head, but Lothar swung back with the inner curve of his sword and sliced deep into Jedra’s right leg.

Jedra flinched backward, bleeding heavily from the wound, and the crowd cheered at the sight of blood.

Lothar tried to get up, but Kayan held him pinned to the ground. “Hit him!” she screamed. “Hit him!”

Jedra tried, but Lothar kept waving the sword faster than he could dodge, all the while struggling to throw off Kayan’s weight at the end of the spear and get up again. Jedra stuck his shield into the blur of metal, but Lothar managed to curve the blade around the edge of it and slice his arm.

Bleeding from two places now, Jedra flailed away with his club in a blind panic. Lothar seemed to be able to parry every blow, though, and now he was winning his shoving match with Kayan as well.

If he got up, they were dead. Jedra was already losing strength, and if the dwarf got past him, Kayan had no defense. She couldn’t fight in close with a spear, and her entire left side was bare where he had sliced open her armor. Frantic, Jedra did the only thing he could think of: he kicked sand in Lothar’s face. It didn’t go anywhere near the dwarf’s eyes, not until he kicked a second time and helped it along psionically. It was such a sudden

impulse that the psionicians stationed around the perimeter had no chance to react. Either that or they had decided it was fair use; either way, Lothar cursed as the sand momentarily blinded him, and Jedra took the opportunity to slip past the dwarf's guard and knock the sword from his hand. It flew end over end out of reach, and Jedra struck again, this time hitting his opponent squarely in his right side. The dwarf's brittle chitin armor shattered, and Jedra hit him again on the same spot.

Lothar groaned and tried to kick himself away, but Jedra swung at his leg, breaking it the same way he had broken Sahalik's. He swung at the dwarf's head, but missed and knocked the spear loose, where it gouged a deep wound across Lothar's chest before sticking against a rib.

The crowd was on its feet now, cheering and shouting, "Kill, kill, kill!" but now that the dwarf was disarmed and crippled, Jedra backed away. He looked up at the stands, then over at the arena entrance where Sahalik stood watching. The elf drew a finger across his throat in an unmistakable gesture, but Jedra couldn't do it.

He looked up again at the stands and at the rows of balconies where the king and his templars sat. He couldn't see the king in the glare, so he held his hand out to block the sun.

A sudden hush spread across the crowd. Jedra heard the creak as every person there turned to look at the balconies.

"What did I do now?" he whispered to Kayan.

"I don't know," she whispered back.

"You've asked for mercy," Lothar said through clenched teeth. "Very sporting of you, but if I'd wanted it I'd have asked for it myself."

"You don't want mercy?" Jedra asked, stunned.

"Do I look like a weakling?" the dwarf spat.

There was movement on the balcony. Jedra squinted, and saw a single figure in a golden robe hold out a fist, thumb down.

The crowd roared its approval. People shouted "Kill him!" and within seconds it had become a chant.

Lothar may not have been a weakling, but he didn't want to die, either. He scrambled toward his sword, kicking with his good leg and pulling himself along with his arms. Jedra reluctantly hit him again in the shoulder, crippling him further.

Tears were streaming from Jedra's eyes now. "I can't do this!" he cried, backing away.

The crowd began to boo, and pieces of rotted fruit and even hunks of spoiled meat began pelting the sand around them. Kayan looked up just in time to dodge a melon, then she snatched the club from Jedra's hand, stepped up to Lothar, and swung it at his head. The crack of club on bone echoed all the way across the arena, and Lothar jerked once, then lay still.

Jedra turned away and threw up. In the sudden silence that greeted his ungladiatorlike action, Kayan whispered, "Bow to the king, damn it!"

Thankful that he'd at least managed to turn away from the king to throw up, Jedra managed to stand and turn around, then bow. He looked at the fallen dwarf, then at Kayan.

"How could you do that?" he asked, suddenly disgusted at the sight of her.

"Don't get all haughty on me," she said, then she lowered her voice and whispered, "I hit him just hard enough to knock him out, and I amplified the noise so it sounded like I'd killed him."

"Oh!" Suddenly mollified, he retrieved his club from her, and they began to walk back toward the slave pens at the base of the ziggurat, relieved to think that they had survived their first battle without having to kill anyone. The cleanup team—two slaves, one with a shovel—passed them on their way out to retrieve the body.

"Sorry about the mess," Jedra said, embarrassed now at having lost his breakfast in front of thousands of people.

"'Appens all the time, chum," the slave with the shovel said. "Excitement, y'know."

Jedra and Kayan walked on to the arena entrance, where Sahalik congratulated them and pounded them on their backs. Some of the other

gladiators crowded around to offer congratulations or advice of their own, but suddenly the noise stopped and everyone looked back out into the arena, where one of the slaves in the cleanup crew held back the dwarf's head while the other slit his throat from ear to ear with a short dagger.

"Hah," Sahalik grunted. "The coward must've been faking it. Don't worry, it won't affect your standing."

As if to belie his words, Jedra's wounded leg buckled beneath him, and he fell to his knees. "Whoa," Sahalik said, grabbing his shoulder in one powerful hand and raising him back up. "You must've lost more blood than I thought. Healer! Get a healer over here."

Jedra hardly heard him. He barely felt it when two of the arena's psionicists took him aside and stopped his wounds from bleeding, or even when they dulled his pain. His mind was a million miles away, in an imaginary world where people didn't fight for amusement and didn't kill each other for sport.

* * *

The gladiators' quarters felt empty that night. Shani was off with Sahalik, celebrating her victory against an elf woman from another noble's house, but the bunk between hers and Jedra's was also empty. The middle-aged man had lost his match. He had never been a friend; they had spoken maybe a dozen words to each other the whole time they'd been housed together, but now his absence left an emptiness. Maybe it was because Jedra knew that somewhere else, in some other gladiator's house, someone was celebrating this man's death.

Kayan was quiet, too. Jedra had tried to talk with her, but she had greeted his overtures with monosyllables until it was clear she just wanted to be left alone. Jedra didn't blame her; his squeamishness had forced her hand, made her try a desperate gamble to save them while keeping her own conscience free of guilt, but it had backfired on her.

The psionicists guarding them were playing dice again, relying on their sense of danger to alert them to any escape attempt. Jedra considered mindlinking with Kayan and trying to surprise them, but she and he were both exhausted; they wouldn't get anything but punishment for their effort. No, they would have to bide their time. An opportunity would come. It had to.

* * *

Sahalik was all smiles in the morning. His former animosity toward his newest gladiators seemed completely forgotten. "People are calling you the squabblers, or the crabby couple," he told them when they assembled for morning practice. "They were much amused by the way you bickered out there. That'll be a real draw if you keep it up, so of course I want you to."

Kayan laughed for the first time since they'd been captured. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"I thought not. So, I will leave that aspect of your performance to you, and we will concentrate on your use of weapons. Today you will learn how to use swords."

He and Shani proceeded to show them how to wield a blade, how to hold it *en garde*, how to attack, parry, feint, and execute dozens of other techniques that every good gladiator could perform in his sleep. By the end of the day their heads were buzzing with the unfamiliar terms and their muscles ached in brand new places. All the same, Jedra was surprised to realize that he had a natural aptitude for the sword. Some instinct seemed to guide his hand when he most needed it, until by the end of the day he could spar with Sahalik for up to a minute before the elf wore down his guard.

When they finished their last session of the day, both of them panting and slick with sweat, Sahalik pointed at the knife scars all over Jedra's body and said, "I wouldn't have believed it, seeing how many blades you've let through your guard since I last saw you, but I think we've found your weapon." He took a long drink from the waterskin they kept beside the

practice field, then handed it to Shani. “How did you survive all those, anyway? Some of them look serious.”

“I didn’t,” Jedra said, then he realized how strange that sounded. “I almost didn’t, anyway. Kayan found me where I lay dying, and she healed me.” He smiled at Kayan, who turned away and took the waterskin from Shani.

Sahalik grunted appreciatively. “You must’ve had a hard time of it after I... left.”

“We did.” Jedra waited for the waterskin, took a long swallow of warm water, then said, “We, uh, we got kicked out of the tribe the next day. We spent quite a while in the desert before we found Kitarak, and then...” He shrugged. “And then more stuff happened, and here we are.”

Sahalik laughed. “‘And then more stuff happened.’ Yes, a fitting end to any tale.” His laughter died, though, and he asked, “What you told me earlier about the Jura-Dai. That was true? They were in trouble when you left them? They wanted me back?”

Jedra nodded. “They would welcome you with open arms.”

“Hmm,” the elf said. “Well, they will have to do without me for a while longer, at least. I have my own battles to fight here.” He laughed wickedly and walked off toward his own quarters.

“What did he mean by that?” Jedra asked Shani. “Does he fight in the games too?”

“Of course he does,” she said. “He’s Rokur’s champion.”

Even if Sahalik had come straight to Tyr after leaving the Jura-Dai, he couldn’t have been there over a fortnight. Champions must come and go awfully fast, Jedra thought. But of course they did, since someone had to die in nearly every battle.

“I hope he’s as good as he thinks he is,” Jedra said, surprised that he should care.

* * *

Sahalik and Shani worked their new team mercilessly day after day, but after their first taste of what awaited them in the arena, Jedra and Kayan soaked up every bit of knowledge as eagerly as they could. Jedra did, at any rate; Kayan fought her battles with precision and skill, but she showed no enthusiasm when she succeeded in penetrating Shani or Kitarak's guard, and she retired to their quarters immediately after each battle.

When Jedra tried to talk with her, she responded like a zombie until he gave up and left her alone. He was afraid for her mind, afraid that the cruelties they'd endured since their first enslavement had finally broken her spirit, but he could think of nothing to bring her out of it. Escape seemed extremely unlikely, yet so did their chances of surviving long as gladiators.

However, if survival as gladiators was their only option, then Jedra intended to do just that. He still didn't like the idea of killing other people for sport, but his experience with Lothar had changed his attitude a little. Lothar had *wanted* to be there, and he had willingly fought a couple of slaves who didn't. Jedra and Kayan had tried to spare his life, but even killing him would have been self-defense under any moral code Jedra had ever heard of. Sahalik assured him that now that he and Kayan had won a battle, anyone else they fought would also be professionals, so they didn't have to worry about killing other slaves. Anyone they faced would be someone who wanted to be there, someone who had chosen their dangerous career and chosen them as opponents in the hopes of winning higher status by beating a winning team. That didn't necessarily make it all right to kill them, but the only other option amounted to suicide, which Jedra didn't think should be required of him either. So he would fight in the arena. He would hate it, and he would escape at the first opportunity, but in the meantime he would fight.

The day of their second contest arrived with inexorable sureness. The days of intervening practice, the skills and tactics they had learned, all seemed condensed into a single moment. As soon as he was led into the holding pens again, it seemed to Jedra that he had merely blinked after fighting the dwarf, and here he was again.

But today he fought a human, a woman both taller and stockier than Kayan, and who also fought with swords. She carried one in either hand, a short, stabbing knife in her left and a longer, double-edged rapier in her right.

The crier announced the fight, saying, “Last week you watched one of these combatants cut off a wild tigone’s paws one at a time before taking its head for a trophy. The other team you watched argue over tactics and dispute the honor of dealing the final blow. Today, who knows what amusement awaits when... Braxa of the House of Gnorr fights... Jedra and Kayan of House Rokur.”

Since Braxa had been named first, she stepped into the arena first. She spun her knife and sword in circles before her, scattering reflections off the glistening blades and drawing an enthusiastic cheer from the audience.

Her jewel-encrusted brass brassiere and equally sparkling chain-link loincloth—revealing an alarming amount of bare skin for a gladiator, woman or not—no doubt added to their excitement.

As Jedra and Kayan followed her, Kayan looked disdainfully at her own saber, a slightly curved, single-edged blade about as long as her arm, and said almost casually, “Maybe if I distract her with my neck you’ll have a chance to stab her in the back.”

“What?” Jedra said, shocked. “Kayan, don’t talk like that. We’ll win this one easy.”

“Sure we will.” She spun her own sword around in a circle, but she didn’t flex her arm right and the blade flew out of her grasp on the upswing, to land point-first in the sand a few feet away. The crowd roared with laughter while she bent to retrieve it.

“That’s good,” Jedra said. “Make her think we’re clumsy.” And maybe make the psionics think we need our psionic talent to help make a fair fight, he thought, but he couldn’t risk saying that. He promptly fumbled his own blade, though, wincing as if he’d just cut himself with it.

The woman, Braxa of House Gnorr, sneered. “Make your jests while you can,” she said, “but the final laugh will be mine.”

“And a good day to you, too,” Jedra said, bowing slightly. He was afraid his voice would crack and reveal his real terror at facing her experienced blade, but he had to hold on for Kayan’s sake. If he could convince her that he was confident, maybe she would grow more so herself.

The crier, standing a few paces away, spread his arms out, then raised them high. “Begin!” he shouted.

This time Jedra leaped first. He stabbed straight for Braxa’s bare bosom, and his sword hit home, but instead of piercing her ribs and sliding into her heart, the point lodged in a link of the chain holding her brassiere cups together, barely scratching the tender skin beneath.

She flipped her long sword up, inside Jedra’s guard.

He felt the edge bite into the soft underside of his upper arm, but before she could shove the point into his chest he twisted away, pulling his sword free and disengaging.

Kayan hadn’t moved. “Come on, give me a hand here!” Jedra yelled at her, and she belatedly swung at Braxa, but the experienced gladiator parried her blow without effort and only Jedra’s sudden lunge toward her exposed side kept her from replying with a deadly attack of her own.

“Fight, damn it!” he shouted at Kayan. “Don’t give up before the battle’s even begun!”

Braxa swung at him while he was distracted, and metal clanged against metal as he blocked her and then let his blade slide down to slice at her legs. She danced out of the way easily and struck again, raining blows down on him faster and faster until the arena echoed with the clang of blade upon blade.

Jedra could feel himself tiring. The cut in his arm bled and stung furiously, but he didn’t want to change hands. He wasn’t good enough with his left to last ten seconds against this demonic woman. He tried using psionics on her, tried pushing her blade aside telekinetically, tried throwing sand in her eyes the way he had done with Lothar, but neither attempt got through the psionist guards’ restricting shields. Only when he tried

blasting her with amplified light and sound did he get a flash and a boom around her head, but she fought on as if nothing had happened.

He beat back another series of blows, then leaped backward for a moment's respite. Kayan backed up with him, trying to stay out of Braxa's reach as well. Her sword arm hardly moved, save to block the other woman's weapon at the last moment. She was fighting purely defensively.

She wasn't mad enough, Jedra realized. She was terrified, and defending herself, but to come out of this alive they needed to win, and to win they both needed to attack. And as Sahalik had taught him during that first week of practice, to get someone to attack when they didn't want to, you had to make them mad.

Braxa stepped back, also growing tired from swinging her sword continuously, and in the momentary lull in battle, Jedra slapped Kayan on the butt with the flat of his sword. "Go after her!" he shouted. "Come on, have you forgotten everything we learned? Don't let her rest. We can wear her out if we work together, but I can't do this all by myself."

She shot him a look of such hatred that Jedra was afraid she would turn on *him*, but instead she mindsent, *I'm doing all I can!*

Try psionics, then, he sent back, *but do something.*

He felt the psionicists' shield descend on him, blanketing his mind from further contact. He didn't know if she'd heard him or not, so he repeated aloud, "Do something!"

With that, he raised his sword and advanced on Braxa again, circling around to put her between him and Kayan. She knew better than to allow that, though; she sidestepped ahead of him until he tried to duck around the other side, but she dodged around him that way, too.

"Shall we dance?" she asked, laughing. "Perhaps that would amuse the crowd more than your pitiful showing so far."

"We're just getting started," Jedra said. "Right, Kayan? Kayan!" Braxa had lunged at him, and he nearly tripped over Kayan's feet when he backpedaled to get clear. She had been right behind *him*.

"Damn it, fight with me or get out of the way!" he shouted.

The crowd had been unusually quiet, listening to them bicker, but they laughed long and loud at that. That seemed to humiliate Kayan into action; she jumped out of the way to the side and kept going in the same direction, trying to circle around Braxa just as Jedra had. Braxa pressed the attack against her, but Kayan's sword became a blur every bit as fast as Braxa's, and the arena echoed again with the clash of metal on metal.

While her sword arm was held high, Jedra took the opportunity to spring in behind Braxa and slash at her exposed right side, cutting deep into the soft flesh just below her ribs, and when she whirled around to defend herself he swung in under her guard and raked his blade across her neck. Blood spilled down her chest and over her brass brassiere. She staggered back a step, her eyes wide and frightened, then she sank to her knees.

There was no need for a final blow; Jedra had hit a major artery, and within seconds the formidable amazon lay face down in the sand.

He looked up at Kayan. "Thanks," he said, sighing heavily.

"*Thanks?*" she screamed. "Thanks? You treat me like dirt, and when I save our lives again all you can say is thanks?"

Jedra couldn't believe his ears. "You didn't save our lives. *I* saved our lives."

"Oh, you think so? Then why were you whining for me to do it for you?"

"Because you weren't doing anything! You were—"

"*Silencer*" The voice echoed around the arena. It was far too loud for a normal throat to have produced; it was either magically or psionically enhanced.

The voice spoke again, and they realized it came from the balconies on the palace side of the stadium. In fact, from the sorcerer-king himself, who stood resplendent in his golden robe with his arms outstretched. He said, "Your petty debate provides us some little amusement, but we quickly grow tired of your domestic squabbles. This is a gladiatorial arena, where battles are fought with blades and missiles, not with words." He laughed, a wicked, low chuckle that shook stones loose from the unfinished ziggurat. "And so

shall you fight. If you wish to quarrel in public, so be it. One week hence, you shall return to this arena, weapons in hand, and battle one another—to the death!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The people in the audience screamed and cheered and stomped their feet. King Kalak had given them a wonderful variation on the usual gladiatorial fare. Most couples did one another in with poison or with a dagger in the night; people hardly ever saw lovers—even ones who quarreled as much as Jedra and Kayan—fight to the death in the arena.

The couple themselves, however, weren't so thrilled. Jedra felt as if his heart were going to pull itself free of its mooring in his chest the way it pounded, and Kayan's face had gone whiter than the blood-drained skin of their vanquished opponent. They stood there staring at each other across her crumpled form, neither saying a word, until the cleanup crew came out to pick up the body.

"Come on," one of the two men said, taking Jedra's sword from his unresisting hand and tugging on his arm. "There's more waitin' their turn."

Jedra and Kayan allowed themselves to be led back underneath the ziggurat. Normally the gladiators all stayed until the end of the games, but this time the two of them were led straight past the slave pens and on out the other side, where their ever-present psionic guards and a couple of Rokur soldiers escorted them up the hill to the estate. Jedra didn't know why the difference in treatment today, but he wasn't going to complain. The less time he had to spend in the stadium, the better.

The stadium! He could still hear the king's voice echoing across it as he had pronounced their doom. He collapsed on his bunk and buried his face in his hands, while Kayan sat and stared at the stone wall.

The walled compound was nearly deserted. The two psionicists, one of the old men and one of the middle-aged women, watched over the exhausted gladiators, and a few soldiers patrolled the grounds as usual, but nearly everyone else was still at the games. Jedra peeked through his fingers at the psionicists. They weren't paying any attention to him or Kayan, no doubt assuming the captives were too tired to make a break. Which made

now the perfect time to try. It didn't look like Kitarak was coming back for them, and there was no way they could wait around until the next game. They would both be killed then for refusing to fight.

He itched to extend his psionic senses, but he knew that anything he and Kayan did would have to be done suddenly in order to keep the element of surprise. They would have to join their minds and make their attack immediately, which meant planning ahead without mindlinking. Which meant whispering. Which meant getting closer to her. Jedra didn't particularly mind that idea, but he didn't expect her to feel the same way.

First things first. He sat up, wincing as his wounded arm protested the movement. No one had healed him this time. Either they didn't feel it was necessary or they didn't want to waste their effort on the doomed. He didn't care. He wouldn't be needing the arm anyway, not for this.

"Kayan?" he said softly. He swung his legs off the side of his bunk, and his ankle chain rattled to the floor.

"Hmm?" She looked over at him, her eyes still glazed over.

"I, urn, I want to apologize for some of the things I said out there today."

She said nothing, just blinked at him.

He went on. "I was trying to get you mad so you would fight. But I guess I overdid it. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," she said. "Me too."

Jedra heard one of the psionics shift in his chair. They would no doubt love to eavesdrop on this tender conversation, but if he and Kayan were going to plan anything...

"I... can I just hold you?" he asked.

She didn't look very pleased with the idea, but she didn't say no, so he shifted over to her bunk and put his left arm around her, being careful not to smear her clothing with his bloody right arm.

They looked into each other's eyes from the closest vantage since they'd been captured. Kayan blinked, then smiled ever so faintly. "I'd almost forgotten what it felt like when we touch."

“So had I.” Jedra lowered his head and kissed the hollow where her neck and shoulders met, tasting the unmistakable essence of her skin beneath the sweat and dust of the arena. He raised up to kiss her on the mouth, but she pulled back.

“Don’t.”

He stopped with his lips just brushing hers. “Why not?”

“Because it’ll only make me love you even more, and I can’t bear it.”

Jedra said, “You can’t bear to love me? Why not?”

She shook her head. “I can’t bear to *lose* you.”

“Ah,” he said, but he was thinking she had a funny way of showing it, if that’s how she’d felt for the last few weeks. Or maybe the sudden realization that they had only a week left had made her examine her own feelings. Who could say?

“You’re not going to lose me,” he whispered to her.

“How can you say that? We have to fight each *other* next time.” She pressed her face against his chest, and hot tears left streaks as they fell. “Oh, Jedra, what have we done?”

“Listen,” he whispered. “We’re going to escape. Right now.”

She sniffed and looked up at him. “What?” “This is as good a time as we’re going to get. There’re just two psionacists in the whole compound, and a couple of dozen soldiers. It’s the opportunity we’ve been waiting for. Let’s do it.”

“Do *what*?”

Jedra kissed her neck again, nibbling his way up to her ear. Barely mouthing the words, he said, “When we link up, the first thing we do is blast the psionacists before they can react. Then... I don’t know. I guess we try to make it over or through the wall somehow, and try to get into the crowd leaving the city after the games. Maybe I can disguise us a little bit by bending the light around us.”

“Maybe? Jedra, this doesn’t sound very well thought out.”

“If you’ve got a better idea, I’m all ears.”

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t.”

“Then let’s go. Are you ready?”

“No.” She lifted her head and kissed him, her lips already hot and soft from crying. The rush of sensation caught Jedra by surprise. He lost himself in the kiss, closing his eyes and letting it carry him away for an eternal moment into a place where only the two of them existed.

“Now I’m ready,” Kayan whispered.

If the kiss was a welcome surprise, joining minds again was fantastic. The surge of strength and well-being that flowed through them was better than they had remembered, and the heightened sense of awareness made them feel like immortals. Time seemed to slow to a crawl while their intellects joined once more into a single mind. The psionistic guards, still smiling embarrassedly as they watched their prisoners embrace, had no idea what incredible new power was being born right under their noses.

Jedra and Kayan never gave them time to discover it. As soon as they had merged, they exploded outward and attacked straight at the psionists’ unprotected minds, overrunning their defenses without resistance. They weren’t able to suppress the guards’ instinctive cries of alarm, neither vocal nor psionic, but they managed to cut them short, using Kayan’s medical abilities to drop the guards into a deep sleep.

Before the bodies had even slumped to the floor, they had moved their focus of awareness on out through the wall and into the compound beyond. It didn’t look as if anyone had noticed anything unusual, but they couldn’t be sure. The psionic shout could have been heard halfway across the city if anyone was attuned to it.

The servants’ gate in the alley was the least guarded; it was visible from only three observation towers—one along the wall and two on the rear corners of the mansion. That meant deceiving six guards, maybe seven if one of the ones on foot patrol was nearby. Not the best of odds, but it was the best they would get, and they were committed now. They brought their awareness back inside the gladiators’ quarters and tried to rise up from Kayan’s bunk. They broke their chains with a thought, but it quickly became apparent that they couldn’t remain linked to such a high degree and

control their individual bodies at the same time. For fine muscle control, they needed to remain separate.

We'll have to break apart at least until we get through the wall, Jedra said. He let his awareness return to his own body. He stood up, fighting the depression that always hit him when they came out of convergence, and his gaze fell upon the two sleeping psionacists.

"Get their clothes," he said. "We can pretend to be them."

"Good idea." Kayan helped him tug off their earth-brown tunics and short breeches, blushing a bit at stripping them naked, but she didn't hesitate. Nor did she hesitate to strip out of her own halter and loincloth to put on the psionacists' clothing. Jedra didn't either. They had been more intimate than this only moments ago. In only a minute more they had both transformed themselves from gladiator—slaves into respectable servants wearing the livery of their noble. Both tunics were loose on them—nobles' servants ate well—but they gathered them up and tied them at the waist.

"Walk like you've got every right to be there," Jedra said, stepping to the door. "Ready?"

"I used to be a templar's assistant," Kayan reminded him. She was smiling again. They were getting out of here!

Jedra opened the door and stepped outside. Kayan followed right behind him, and together they strode across the compound, past the cookhouse and the storage sheds and the servants' quarters, toward the back gate. Jedra concentrated on twisting the light around them to blur their faces. He couldn't control it well enough to project an image of the psionacists they were trying to impersonate, but he hoped that anyone who looked their way would merely think the heat was affecting their eyes.

They made it almost to the gate before Jedra's danger sense began to tingle. Someone had taken an interest in them, or was about to. He tried to locate whoever it was, but could find no one in the guard towers, anywhere behind them, or to either side. That left only—

The gate opened, and Shani stepped through. Jedra's breath caught in his throat, but he forced himself to nod casually and walk on past, as if

nothing were amiss. Kayan did the same, but they had barely squeezed through the gateway before the elf woman saw through their deception and shouted, “Hold it!”

“Run!” Jedra said, and this time Kayan took his advice. They both sprinted down the alley, with Shani right behind them shouting, “Escape! Guards! Slaves loose!”

She was full-blooded elf, and faster than either of them. Jedra heard her footsteps draw closer and heard Kayan shriek as Shani grabbed her. He skidded to a stop and turned around just in time to see Shani draw her dagger from its scabbard at her belt and hold it across Kayan’s neck.

“Don’t move, either of you,” Shani panted.

Link up! Kayan mindsent. Jedra did, and they suddenly became a single mind again. Effortlessly, they snatched the knife away from Shani and broke her hold on Kayan, forcing her back into the wall hard enough to rattle her teeth when she hit. Slowly, clumsily, they moved their bodies together and put their arms around one another, then levitated themselves into the air.

The last time Jedra had tried this he’d only had his own power to draw on. Now with the synergy of Kayan’s presence they leaped upward, and when they shoved off against the alley wall they shot away like an arrow from a bow.

But a sudden wind howled up from the end of the alley and blew them backward, swirling dust around them at the same time to blind them and make them cough and gasp for air. They tried to still the wind, but it merely became more turbulent. They searched for the source of it, but in the moment it took to locate the psionist in the guard tower on the wall, it had blown them up and over that same wall and back into the compound.

No! they shouted. They struggled to rise up again, but the wind forced them to the ground, pinning them there while another less substantial but equally strong force battered at their minds. They recognized the new power from before: multiple minds in convergence, all pressing their combined will against Jedra’s and Kayan’s own. Where they had come from was no mystery, either; when Jedra and Kayan looked with the right focus,

they could see tendrils of psionic energy reaching out from all the guard towers and from many of the buildings inside. Nearly all of Rokur's soldiers must have been psionics as well. Either that or the ones who were had been posted on guard duty just in case their prisoners made a break today.

Either way, the combined effort of all those linked minds once again overpowered Jedra's and Kayan's wild and still largely uncontrolled talent. Lightning and thunder flashed and boomed around them as they struggled to break free, but the guards' grip slowly tightened on them, blocking their powers one at a time until they became trapped in a lightless, soundless, formless prison of thought. Their universe shrank to nothing, then with one final squeeze the psionics took their very consciousness away.

* * *

When Jedra awoke, it was late evening. He was once again chained to the wall in the gladiators' quarters, and the noble himself, Rokur, stood before him. Kayan was not on her bunk beside him, nor anywhere else in the building's single room.

"Where is she?" Jedra asked.

"She is safe," Rokur said. "I'm keeping you in separate quarters until your... ah... final encounter."

"Why?"

The noble laughed. "You don't think I'm going to risk losing you twice, do you? Not now that the king has taken an interest in your welfare. He'd have *me* in the arena if that happened. No, I prefer watching, so I've made sure you can't escape or hurt yourselves before the game."

Jedra couldn't resist saying, "We would have made it if Shani hadn't been there."

The noble said, "No. If she hadn't distracted the tower guards by returning early from the stadium, you wouldn't have made it even to the gate. We were expecting you to try something."

That seemed likely, given how fast the guards had come down on them. “We’ll try again,” Jedra said, knowing it was bravado speaking. Then the other thing that Rokur had said penetrated, and he cursed himself for not thinking of it sooner. There was one sure way to make sure he and Kayan didn’t have to fight: If he killed himself first, she wouldn’t have to do it.

He certainly wasn’t going to kill her, no matter what the king wanted. Kalak could use his defiling sorcery to turn Jedra into a quivering pile of goo first, but he would never harm Kayan. He said so to Rokur, but the noble merely laughed.

“You’ll fight, because if you don’t, you’ll both die,” he said. “As it is, at least one of you will live. You’ll both fight to lose, but you’ll fight.” He laughed, and added, “And who knows what will happen when you feel the first bite of the blade? You may find that sweet life is more important to you than your precious love.” Then he turned away and left Jedra alone with his psionicist guards.

“Never,” Jedra whispered after he was gone, but the seed of doubt had been sown. Did he really have the courage to just stand there and let Kayan kill him? Or to take his own life to prevent her from having to do it? He didn’t know. He couldn’t know until he found himself doing it, because no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t imagine ever raising a weapon against her.

Sahalik showed up a few hours later, smelling of sweat and cheap wine. He carried a jug with him, which he held precariously in his right hand as he sat down heavily on Kayan’s bunk and belched. A fresh scar drew an angry red line across his forehead. “That was a good fight you put up this afternoon,” he said.

Jedra snorted. “I feel like I won the battle but lost the war.”

“Hah.” Sahalik scratched at another scar on his abdomen, swigged from the jug, then offered it to Jedra. “I didn’t exactly make out like a champion, either.”

“You must’ve won, if you’re here talking to me.”

“Barely.”

Jedra took the bottle from him and sniffed it cautiously. Rotgut. But it was the only wine he was liable to get, and he could use a little dulling of the senses. He took a mouthful and swallowed slowly, trying not to let the fumes make him cough.

“Tough luck about next week,” Sahalik said. “Kalak’s a malicious bastard for making you two fight each other.” “That he is.”

“I’m sorry it worked out this way.”

“Me, too.”

Jedra handed the jug back, and Sahalik took a long draught. “Nothing ever seems to work out the way we expect, does it?”

“Not very often,” Jedra admitted, then he laughed softly.

“What?”

“Well,” Jedra said, “I sure never would have expected to be sitting here sharing a jug of wine with you, not considering the way we met.”

Sahalik grinned. He was missing another tooth. “Ah, that. I was a malicious bastard, too, there’s no denying it. I’d been second in command for so long I was going crazy waiting for that old kank of a chief to die. I led all the raids, but he took all the glory. It ate on me. Made me mean.”

“I could tell.” Jedra took the jug and drank again. It didn’t taste so bad on the second swallow.

Sahalik said, “I was actually kind of glad when I woke up out in the desert and remembered how I’d got there. Gave me a perfect excuse to go after some glory of my own.” He shook his shaggy head. “But you know, I finally learned something today. No matter how big you are, no matter how strong and how mean, there’s always going to be somebody bigger and stronger and meaner. It’s just a matter of time.”

“I suppose so.”

Sahalik belched again and took the jug back. “So you think the tribe’s ready for a new chief?” he asked.

Jedra shrugged. It was hard to concentrate on Sahalik’s words, but he made himself try. He said, “The old one’s still kicking, but he didn’t look

good when we last saw him. I don't know if you'd have to wait for him to die—he'd probably give you the honor just for the asking. If the Jura-Dai can do that sort of thing."

"The Jura-Dai can do whatever we want," Sahalik said. He drank, then said, "I think I will go back. I will come gibbering and capering out of the desert like a mad fool, and I will bark like a rasclinn at the moons until everyone laughs at me. And then—" he belched "—my worst fears already realized, I will settle down to become a wise old man whom even the warriors respect."

"Sounds like a good plan," Jedra said. "I'd love to go with you, but you see how it is." He rattled his leg chain.

"I would help you escape if I could," Sahalik said, heedless of the guards listening to him, "but the entire city would come after us. Your upcoming battle is the biggest thing to happen here since Kalak started the ziggurat. Everyone is betting on it."

"Really." Jedra took the jug and drained the last of the wine. He didn't know what to say to that.

Sahalik said, "So far the betting gives you just about even odds."

"I hate to disappoint everybody, but there won't be any fight."

Sahalik shook his head. "Don't be so sure. If you don't fight, you'll both be tortured to death. The crowd must be entertained, after all."

"Gods forbid that the crowd be disappointed," Jedra said wryly.

Sahalik didn't smile. "As hard as Kalak has been pushing this city to build his ziggurat, he needs to provide an outlet for people's frustrations. If he doesn't, there's going to be a revolt. So you can be sure he'll make a spectacle of you one way or the other."

"Let him, then," Jedra said. "But I won't provide it for him."

"You're not thinking this through," Sahalik said. He took the jug from Jedra, saw that it was empty, and set it on the floor beside the bunk. "If you do fight, you can at least assure that one of you will die a relatively painless death. Under the circumstances, it would be the best gift you could give Kayan."

Jedra shuddered. “I couldn’t.”

“Then you had best hope she can give it to you.” Sahalik stood up. “During our next practice sessions I will show you both how to kill someone painlessly, and how to make superficial wounds that will make the battle look much worse than it is. But I’m afraid that’s all I can do.” He picked up his jug and walked to the door, but he paused with his hand on the latch. “Besides spreading the tale, of course. I will make the tribe’s bard compose a more complimentary song than his last one about you, and I will send him to every city in the land to sing about your tragic love.”

“Thanks.” Jedra leaned back against the wall, blushing.

Sahalik shrugged. “The Jura-Dai honor our heroes.”

Heroes, Jedra thought. Hah. He never wanted to be a hero.

* * *

Over the next few days, he got a small taste of what it felt like, though. All the soldiers and servants whispered among themselves and watched him whenever he took the practice field, no doubt trying to gauge his performance so they could decide who to bet on, and between practices he got the best meals he’d ever eaten. He assumed Kayan was getting the same treatment, but the noble was true to his word; they even practiced separately. Sahalik and Shani offered to pass messages back and forth, but neither one could think of anything to say except “I love you.”

When Jedra asked Sahalik if he’d talked to Kayan about prearranging the fight, Sahalik laughed and said, “I suspect that any fighting you do will be over who has to strike the other. She refuses to raise arms against you, just as you have refused to against her.” All the same, Sahalik taught Jedra—and presumably Kayan—how to perform a merciful execution. Fortunately, if anything could be considered fortunate in their situation, they would both be fighting with the simplest of gladiators’ weapons: a sword and a shield, so at least they wouldn’t have to bludgeon one another to death. Jedra tried to learn the various deadly cuts and thrusts into vital

organs, thinking to use the best method on himself at the first opportunity, but Sahalik assured him that opportunity would never arise. He practiced with a soft wooden sword, and if he did succeed in killing himself either before or during the actual battle then Kayan would be punished for it.

“You have no options,” Sahalik told him one morning after he’d caught Jedra testing his blunted blade against his own chest. “One of you must die by the other’s hand or the survivor will be tortured to death, and the sooner you accept that the better off you both will be.”

“I can’t accept it,” said Jedra. “There has to be a way out of this mess. I just haven’t found it yet.”

“There doesn’t have to be a way out,” Sahalik insisted. “You’ve lived long enough to know that.”

Jedra ignored him. “How about my own psionic power?” he asked. “Will I be able to use that during the fight?”

Sahalik shrugged. “Who can say? The judges won’t let you simply stop your heart, or hers either. It wouldn’t be bloody enough. But if you try something spectacular, they might let you do it.”

Something spectacular. Jedra wondered if mind-merging and knocking the ziggurat over onto the stadium and the palace would be enough, but he couldn’t see how that would help him and Kayan get away. There were simply too many other psionics who could also mind-merge and keep them from doing it. If the last few weeks in Tyr had taught Jedra anything, it was that he and Kayan weren’t invincible. They had a talent, sure, and when they used it they could do some incredible things, but they weren’t indestructible. They were just average people with a not-so-average ability who were nonetheless about to be chewed up and spit out by the system just like everyone else.

That kind of attitude wasn’t going to get him anywhere, he knew, but neither was wishful thinking and self-delusion. Unless he could come up with an escape plan, he and Kayan would face one another in the arena the day after tomorrow and then nothing anybody could do would be able to save them.

Unless of course the king suddenly had a change of heart, but since Kalak didn't have a heart to begin with, the odds of that happening were less than slim. No, they had to escape beforehand or not at all. Trouble was, Jedra could think of no way to do that.

* * *

The next day, the last before their fight, came and went with no new revelations. That evening Jedra sent a message to Kayan through Sahalik, asking what plans, if any, she had made, but her reply was simply, "What's the point?"

After Sahalik delivered that short line to Jedra, he sat on Kayan's former bunk and said, "I wish I knew what to tell you. You've got a chance here to go down in history as the most tragic couple Athas has ever known, but neither of you wants to even consider that aspect of this. You're both pining for the impossible instead."

Jedra shrugged. "We want to go down in history as the happiest couple Athas has ever known."

Sahalik laughed. "The way you two argue? Even if you walked out of here free tonight, that would never happen. It was your arguing that got you into this situation in the first place."

"Don't remind me," Jedra said glumly.

"Sorry."

They sat in silence for a minute or so before Jedra said, "When we were crossing the desert not long after we met Kitarak, we were attacked by something he called a tokamak. An id fiend. It can make you think your worst fear is coming true."

"I have battled such a beast," Sahalik said.

"Let me guess," said Jedra. "You suddenly found yourself standing there with no pants on, and everybody was laughing at you."

"Close," the elf said, smiling wryly. "Very close."

Jedra didn't smile. "My worst fear was that I would hurt Kayan. Every time I would attack the beast, suddenly it would be her instead."

"Ah. And now here you are."

"Yeah."

"Well," Sahalik said, "don't ever let anybody tell you that dreams can't come true. Looks like you have proof that they can."

"Ha ha."

The big elf smiled weakly and stood up. "If you think of anything else I can do for you, let me know."

"Just get us out of here," Jedra said.

"I would if I could," Sahalik said. "Believe me, I've thought of every angle, but there just isn't any way."

"There has to be," Jedra told him. "I'm just not thinking of it."

Sahalik looked over at the ever-present psionics, who watched them with bored amusement. "Well," he said, "if you do think of it, don't think too loudly. They're not as sympathetic as I am."

No, they aren't, Jedra thought, once again marveling at the twists of fate that had turned Sahalik into an ally, and Kayan into an adversary.

Jedra lay awake all night, trying to scheme a way out of their plight, but when morning came he was no wiser. A serving boy brought his breakfast, but he couldn't eat any of it. He just stood at the barred window and watched the sky grow lighter and felt the air grow hotter until the guards came to take him to the games.

Sahalik came with them, and helped Jedra dress in his leather armor. He was armored for battle as well, but he shrugged it off when Jedra asked him about it.

"It's my last fight," he said. "I was already scheduled for it when I gave Rokur notice that I was leaving, and I had to stick out the week to train you two anyway, so I decided to pick up one last week's pay while I was at it. Maybe it'll help bring the Jura-Dai back to better times."

“You be careful,” Jedra told him. “There aren’t any sure bets out there in the arena.”

Sahalik grinned and slapped him on the back. “Yes, Mother.”

Shani was not with him; she was evidently taking care of Kayan. Jedra let Sahalik and the guards, both psionic and otherwise, lead him through the streets of Tyr to the stadium. On the way he tried to reach out with his psionic senses to see if he could spot any weakness in their psychic restraints, but their shields blocked him from even that simple use of his power. He felt their stifling presence like a blanket wrapped tightly around him.

The other gladiators cheered when he walked with his escort into the holding area beneath the ziggurat. He wasn’t led to the slave pens this time, but to a separate individual cage on the main floor, from which he could watch the games. Kayan was still nowhere to be seen, but the gladiators’ waiting area was immense, and the massive columns holding up the rest of the ziggurat blocked much of it from view. She could have been only a few feet away, blocked by psionic means from contact, and he would never know.

Since theirs was the showcase fight of the day, they were scheduled late in the games. From his cage, Jedra watched gladiator after gladiator march out into the arena, and only half of them march back. The fighting often lasted until both combatants were covered with blood and could barely stand, but quite a few fights lasted less than a minute. Deadly weapons didn’t make for long battles unless the combatants were almost perfectly matched, and even though the officials tried to match them as closely as possible, as soon as one gladiator got the upper hand over another, he pressed his advantage without mercy.

Jedra found himself watching the gory spectacle with horrified fascination. The cheers and taunts of the crowd blended into a steady roar in his ears, and the slashing and bashing of weapons became individual movements in a single bizarre, afternoon-long dance of death. The motion paused to allow new partners to enter the field, but the dance itself went on and on without interruption.

Sahalik shook him out of his reverie. “You’re next,” he said while a guard unlocked the cage. Five more guards and three psionacists stood ready. Sahalik carried Jedra’s short sword and shield, which he handed over, but the instant Jedra’s hand gripped the hilt he felt the grip of the psionacists close in around his hand as well. They weren’t going to let him use the blade on himself.

Some of the other gladiators shouted crude encouragement, saying things like, “Go show her who’s boss!” and, “Don’t take any sass from her this time!” Jedra ignored them, searching for Kayan. Where was she?

There. Emerging from behind the pillars nearly fifty feet away, flanked by her own guards. Jedra’s heart leaped at the sight of her, but she looked so small and helpless he wondered if she’d been starving herself. She wore armor as concealing as his own, no brass brassiere for her. She looked beautiful to him just the same. *Kayan!* he mindsent, not caring if he was punished.

Jedra, she replied. *I love—* But the psionacists didn’t let her finish. The shield around Jedra drew tight, isolating him completely from Kayan or anyone else.

When the cleanup crew was done removing the body from the previous fight and covering up the slippery spots with fresh sand, the crier stepped to the center of the arena and shouted, “And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for, a command performance for our illustrious, most magnificent King Kalak. I present the crabby couple, the prickly pair, the—” Whatever else he called Jedra and Kayan was lost in the roar of the crowd.

Sahalik gave Jedra a slap on the back and shouted to be heard over the noise, “Remember what I taught you: a few superficial wounds to satisfy the crowd, then a clean stroke straight to the heart.” Then he shoved Jedra out into the arena.

Shani pushed Kayan out at the same time. Instead of walking out into the center the way they were supposed to, they both turned toward each other and met just outside the entrance. They hugged fiercely, their swords and shields and armor getting in the way and tears streaming down both their faces. They kissed, momentarily slipping into convergence, but the

psionics came down instantly on that, forcing them apart both mentally and physically. The spectators, seeing only that they had kissed and then seemingly leaped back from one another, cheered at this first indication of hostility.

“She bit ’im!” Jedra heard someone shout.

Guards with pikes advanced on them from beneath the ziggurat, forcing them farther into the arena. As Jedra and Kayan backed away from them, the crier waved the crowd to silence and shouted, “Harken the words of your king!”

Kalak stood in his balcony at the opposite end of the arena, once again in his golden robe. He was a tiny figure at that distance, but his magically-enhanced voice echoed all around the stadium. “Today’s battle has captured the hearts of the entire city,” he said. “Like no other contest in the history of Tyr, this ritual combat has sparked the imaginations of every couple here. What husband has not dreamed of killing his wife for some slight, either real or imagined? What wife has not dreamed the same? Many of you have acted out your fantasies, but always furtively, behind closed doors. Today we will see the ultimate domestic quarrel played to its logical conclusion for all to see!”

Cheers from the crowd echoed off the ziggurat and the balconies and the stadium walls, but Kalak held out his hands for silence. “The betting has been fierce. Everyone has a favorite. But some of the less realistic among you would prefer to see a happier ending. I have been flooded with requests for mercy, from the lowliest romantic in the warrens to the highest ranking templars. Even their trainer, the popular elf-warrior Sahalik of the Jura-Dai, has asked for clemency.”

A few ragged cheers sprang out at the mention of his name, but far more people booed the elf’s obvious sentimentality. Jedra turned back to look at Sahalik, who stood just inside the entrance with a bemused expression on his face. *Thank you*, Jedra mindsent, amazed that the elf would risk the king’s wrath for them; then, not knowing if his message made it through or not, he raised his sword in salute. Sahalik shrugged embarrassedly.

“Their pleas did not fall on deaf ears,” Kalak said. “Because so many have asked it, and because I am a merciful king, I decree...” He paused dramatically, and Jedra held his breath while he waited for the words that would end this farce. “I decree that the winner of this battle shall go free!”

Jedra exhaled noisily. He felt as if he’d been stabbed in the heart. The crowd went wild, stomping and cheering, but it was all show. Nobody really believed there was any mercy involved. No one who had ever loved someone, anyway. The last thing either Jedra or Kayan wanted was to win their freedom with the other’s life. Kalak’s gift of freedom would mean nothing but the undisturbed opportunity to dwell on the horrible way it had been achieved. And of course it disrupted any plans they might have made for throwing the fight, which was no doubt Kalak’s main intent.

Kayan shouted up to the king, “May you be the subject of equal mercy when your time comes.”

“Kayan!” Jedra whispered to her. “He could fry us with a thought.”

“What difference would it make?” she asked.

But the king only laughed and said, “You amuse me. Good. Amuse me some more. Let the battle begin!” He raised his arms out to either side, then clapped his hands together in front of him. A peal of thunder shook the arena. The crier echoed the king’s command in a much tinier voice: “Begin!”

Jedra looked at Kayan. She looked at him. They stood well inside each other’s guard; either could have stabbed the other to death without hindrance. Instead they leaned together for a final kiss. At first the thousands of people in the audience laughed at their bravado, but they soon grew restless and began to chant, “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Kayan took a step back. “Now what?” she asked. Her voice wavered, and her pulse beat visibly in her neck.

Jedra swallowed. His own heart was beating so hard that the crystal he wore around his neck bounced against his chest with each beat. “We put on a show, I guess,” he said.

“And then what?”

“I don’t know!” He turned away, unable to face her, unable to say the words that had to be said, unable even to think anymore about what they must do. He looked up at the stands full of people, all of them expecting a bloody battle, and finally something snapped. Hardly aware of what he was doing, he tilted back his head and howled a long, ululating cry of rage and frustration. He howled until his lungs were empty and his throat was raw.

The crowd ate it up, thinking he was being punished psionically for not fighting. And with that encouragement, they began throwing rotted fruit and meat. Jedra easily dodged the offal, but he couldn’t dodge the unseen fists that seemed to pummel him, nor the hands that gripped his sword arm and swung it toward Kayan. The guards were letting the crowd’s psionic powers through to them.

A babble of voices filled Jedra’s mind. He was about to shield them out when a familiar voice overpowered the rest. The message was the same—merely the single word, “Fight,” but it came unmistakably from Kitarak.

Jedra whirled around toward the source of the voice, but it had been too brief to locate. Somewhere on the east side of the stadium; that was all he could tell for sure.

Kitarak is here! he mindsent to Kayan. The psionics would know he had spoken to her, but they couldn’t eavesdrop on their conversation. They could only block it, and if they did that then they would have to block the crowd, too.

I heard him, Kayan replied. *He wants us to fight, too.* She still sounded dispirited, as if her last hope had died.

No, Jedra said. *He must want us to buy him time to get us free!*

Some of Kayan’s former enthusiasm returned to her psionic voice. *You think so?* she asked.

It’s got to be.

Kayan fended off a melon with her shield, but it splattered seeds and juice all over her feet. *Let’s do it, then, before they start throwing rocks,* she said, and she raised her sword in the *en garde* position.

Fighting the psionic members of the audience who would rather have him simply hack away at her, Jedra brought up his own sword and they crossed blades. The crowd cheered. Then Kayan darted forward, corkscrewing around Jedra's sword to stab him right in the thick leather over his chest. If he hadn't been wearing armor, she would have skewered his heart with her first blow.

"Hey!" he shouted, leaping back in surprise.

"You didn't think I was paying attention during practice, did you?" she asked, grinning wickedly. Without waiting for an answer, she attacked again, this time with a slash at his midsection which he parried easily enough, but she flicked her blade around to the other side with lightning speed and hit the armor over his left flank.

Jedra belatedly struck back at her, slashing down toward her heavily armored chest, but she raised her shield and blocked him easily.

"You'll have to do better than that," she said. Then, in a mocking voice, she said, "Come on, fight! Do you expect me to do everything?"

Jedra laughed. They were going to make it. Kitarak was here to rescue them, and all was right with the world. "Brace yourself," he said, and he launched into what Sahalik had called a windmill attack, bringing his blade down on her shield, whipping it around on the rebound to clang against her sword, using the rebound from that to reverse direction again and slash at her side, and so on back and forth in an even rhythm that looked impressive but was one that she could predict and counter with ease. She struck back in the midst of his attack, of course, setting up a rhythm of her own that he countered just as easily.

This was a sophisticated audience, though. They knew a mock battle when they saw one, and they began to boo. More fruit flew. The psionic battering Jedra and Kayan had felt earlier had died down when they began to fight, but now it picked up again as the frustrated crowd tried to force the fight in a bloodier direction.

"We're losing them," Jedra said, panting now from the exertion. "Kitarak had better hurry up."

“Let’s make it flashier,” Kayan said, and to show what she meant she attacked him psionically with a burst of light and thunder. Jedra rocked back, his ears ringing, and barely parried her accompanying sword attack.

“Hah!” he shouted, recovering after a couple of steps back. “You think that’s flashy—watch this.” He concentrated on the air around her, whipping it into a wind that blew her hair out straight behind her and nearly wrenched her shield from her grip. Then, not sensing any restrictions on his power yet, he froze the air until frost swirled beside her, dumping the heat into a tiny spot of ground a few feet to her right, which after a few seconds exploded in a shower of hot sand which the wind blew away from both of them.

The crowd cheered, but Kayan said mockingly, “Big deal. How about this?” The air shimmered around her, and suddenly there were two of her, then four, then eight, all lunging toward Jedra at once. Only one of them was real, but he didn’t know which one, not until he felt a blade bite deep into the armor over his right biceps.

“Ow!” he shouted, twisting away. She’d cut right through the leather. A rivulet of blood ran out from under his armor.

“Jedra!” Kayan shouted. The phantom copies of her vanished, and she reached toward him, instinctively wanting to comfort and heal him.

No! he mindsent, at the same time slashing at her as if he feared her approach. *Don’t ruin the effect!*

The effect? You’re hurt!

We’re supposed to be trying to kill each other, Jedra pointed out. He fainted left, then swung right, reaching past Kayan’s guard and nicking her right forearm.

“That hurts!” she yelled.

I’m sorry, but I had to do it. Jedra mindsent. *Numb the pain, but let it bleed a while.*

The crowd cheered at the sight of blood, but Jedra didn’t know how much longer they could keep up the deception with superficial wounds. He

directed a thought toward Kitarak in the eastern stands: *Hurry up, or we'll have to hurt each other worse than this.*

Kitarak's voice spoke in his mind again. *You must do just that. You must kill Kayan.*

"What?" Jedra shouted aloud.

Kayan must have heard his message as well. She completely dropped her guard, not to let Jedra carry out their mentor's command, but out of shock.

To cover for her, Jedra made a flash of light, then in a burst of inspiration he bent the light to create an illusion just as she had, but instead of making copies of himself he made dozens of giant bugs. They advanced on her, waving pincers and tentacles and chittering with made-up sound that Jedra stole from the squeak of his own armor as he moved.

Run from them, he mindsent. That'll give us time.

Kayan obeyed, backing away in horror. She didn't have to fake it; Kitarak's words had shocked her to the core.

Jedra had gotten a better fix on the tohr-kreen. He glanced up to the center of the eastern stand and saw him there, his oversized insectile body literally dwarfing the person beside him: a dead ringer for Lothar, the dwarf Jedra and Kayan had fought two weeks earlier. Jedra mindsent to Kitarak, *What do you mean, kill her? I can't do that!*

You must, if she is to escape, Kitarak replied. *There must be a death, but she cannot kill you because Kalak would never let her go afterward, despite his promise. You must kill her, and she must enter the crystal world you wear around your n—*

His voice cut off in midsentence. The psionics had evidently decided that there was too much communication going on between Jedra and Kayan and the audience.

Jedra looked down at the good-luck charm he wore on a thong around his neck. Of course, the crystal! Kayan could live forever inside it.

Jedra was so excited that his illusory bugs faded away, leaving Kayan halfway across the arena running from nothing. The audience booed and

pelted her with more fruit, and this time a few harder missiles as well. She dodged them as best she could, holding her shield over her head while she ran back toward Jedra.

Kitarak is crazy! she mindsent. She slashed at Jedra again as soon as she came within range, no doubt hoping to still the torrent of garbage being thrown from above. Jedra blocked her sword with his own, amplifying the clang for the crowd.

No, he sent. You could live in there, and—

And go crazy, like Yoncalla? Or get stabbed by children in a bizarre city? That's not my idea of survival. She swung at him for emphasis with every phrase, and they battered away at each other again—this time less predictably—until the audience quieted. Of course being less predictable also made it more dangerous; Jedra got another cut—this one on his left arm, and he split a big wedge out of Kayan's shield.

The sword wound was nothing compared to the emotional letdown he felt, for of course Kayan was right. Life inside a crystal would be a poor substitute for the real thing; if that was all the help Kitarak could offer them, then he was hardly any help at all.

The audience didn't stay quiet for long. They had come to see a battle to the death, not a couple of inept sword fighters giving each other practice-field wounds. This battle had already gone on longer than most, and it was proving to be a big disappointment.

Thousands of people, all of them with the same wish, were evidently too strong for the psionicists to control completely. Jedra felt his arms and legs jerk again as people fought to control him, and he had to be extra careful not to harm Kayan with a crowd-induced twitch at the wrong moment. But if the crowd could get through to him, he might be able to get through to the crowd...

He glanced up toward Kitarak, but before he could mindspeak to him, the dwarf beside him waved, and a different voice in his mind said, *Hello, traveler. We meet again! Only this time, I am the explorer in your world.*

The last time Jedra had heard that voice, he'd been escaping in a whirlwind through a crystal sky. *Yoncalla*, he thought as he faked an attack toward Kayan's head. *Kayan, Yoncalla's here!*

I know, she said distractedly, making a halfhearted block with her notched shield. The immortal must have been mindspeaking to her, too. Sure enough, a moment later she said, *Hah, he's still crazy, too. He wants—wait a minute! That's Lothar's body. He's alive again in Lothar's body!* She swung excitedly at Jedra as she mindspoke, catching him by surprise and landing a solid blow to his left side. He felt the blade bite through his armor and into the soft flesh beneath.

"Yeow!" he shouted, leaping back. *Watch out!*

Sorry, she sent, but she didn't sound sorry at all. She sounded jubilant as she said, *But Kitarak is right; you'll have to... do worse to me. But it doesn't have to be permanent.*

What do you mean? Jedra demanded, parrying another blow. *Dead is dead!*

Tell that to Yoncalla. She attacked again with a straight-in lunge that he parried easily, forcing her sword arm out to her side and leaving her wide open for a fatal stab to the heart. He backed away instead, and the crowd booed.

Damn it, Kayan said, *I did that on purpose. Next time take advantage of it.*

What?

She frowned. *Kill me, you fool, or we'll never get out of here alive!*

Then she broke contact. Her presence vanished like a blown-out candle flame, as if she had already died. Her body stood slack, her arms twitching with the crowd's attempts to control her, but Kayan was no longer home. The crystal around Jedra's neck, however, suddenly radiated her presence. She had made the transfer, trusting in Kitarak's ability to somehow revive her body and put her mind back into it as he had apparently done with Lothar's body and Yoncalla. Jedra didn't have nearly as much faith in their

mentor as she did, but she had forced his hand, because without her there to continue the fight he had only one option.

This had better work, he mindsent to Kitarak. Then, weeping with fear and frustration, he knocked Kayan's sword aside and plunged his own blade straight through her armor and into her heart.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The audience roared as if they had all shared in the final blow. In the last few minutes of the battle Jedra had nearly forgotten the whole city full of people surrounding him, but now he looked up at the stands, where everyone stomped and cheered and waved their hats. When he pulled his sword free from Kayan's chest and they saw the blood covering the end of the blade they went wilder still. Even Kitarak and Lothar/Yoncalla were on their feet, and Jedra heard Kitarak's voice in his mind saying, *Well done. Now take her body and meet us outside the city.* Along with the tohr-kreen's voice came an image of a secluded spot between two hills not far to the east.

I'll be there if they'll let me go, Jedra replied. He turned toward the palace balconies, where Kalak still sat, smiling at his cleverness in arranging this entertainment. Jedra bent at the waist in a shallow bow—just enough to satisfy the arrogant ruler—then he reached down and picked up Kayan's body, cradling her in his arms. Her arms and legs and head dangled limply, and the wound in her chest still bled. Jedra could hardly see through his tears as he carried her toward the arena entrance, where Sahalik and the other gladiators waited. No one congratulated him on winning, as they usually did after a battle. They all knew how Jedra felt.

"I grieve with you," the elf warrior said. "But you did what you had to, like a true warrior. Come with me to the desert and live with the Jura-Dai."

Jedra shook his head. *All is not what it seems,* he mind-sent. He sent the image that Kitarak had given him and said, *Meet us there tonight.*

Sahalik gave nothing away. "As you wish," he said, nodding.

Jedra pushed past him and the other gladiators who crowded around to see the body, but one of the psionics who guarded the gladiators, a stocky, gray-haired, no-nonsense sort of woman, stopped him before he reached the tunnel to the other side of the ziggurat.

"She's dead," Jedra told her.

“I’ll determine that,” she replied. She touched her hand to Kayan’s forehead, then to the bloody wound in her chest. She frowned, perhaps sensing that something wasn’t quite right, but at last when she could find no sign of life she said, “Yes, you seem to have done the job. Where are you taking the body?”

“Out into the desert,” Jedra replied. “To give her a decent burial.”

“Scavengers will get her within a day no matter how deep you dig,” the woman said. “You’d be better off letting us bury her here.”

She said it kindly, but an image formed in Jedra’s mind of a mass grave, a pit full of decaying bodies, most of them slaves who had died on the ziggurat. He shuddered at the thought of Kayan lying among them, even if Kitarak couldn’t revive her body.

“No,” he said. “She’s mine, and I’ll take care of her.” He pushed past the woman, following the torch-lit corridor beneath the ziggurat until he emerged out the other side, then he marched straight on through the nearly deserted city and out the caravan gate. The guards there gave him no trouble over leaving the city with a dead body in his arms; in fact, when they saw who he was and whom he carried, one of them laughed and held out his hand to the other, saying, “Hah, I win. Pay up.”

* * *

The rendezvous spot was at least three miles out of town. Jedra found it easily enough, but he ached in every muscle by the time he got there. He’d tried levitating Kayan’s body, but the drain on his energy was worse that way than if he simply carried her, so he’d finally bowed to necessity and slung her unceremoniously over his shoulder, holding her legs against his chest and letting her head and arms dangle over his back.

She hadn’t begun to stiffen yet. Jedra didn’t know if that was normal or if Kayan had done something to prevent it before she had... vacated her body, but when he laid her on the ground he was glad that she didn’t stay folded up in the position in which he’d carried her. He arranged her on her

back with her arms folded over her chest, then sat down on a rock beside her to wait for Kitarak and Yoncalla and Sahalik to arrive.

The crystal at his neck felt warm against his skin. He wanted to enter it himself and see how Kayan was doing, but he knew that would be dangerous. The crystal itself might be dangerous, but while he was inside with her he couldn't guard their bodies, either, and they could both wind up dead in the real world. That might prove to be merely an inconvenience if Kitarak could do the same trick for them both that he evidently had done for Yoncalla, but Jedra was still not convinced.

It felt strange, sitting beside his lover's body while the sun slowly tracked its way down the western sky, not knowing whether to grieve at her death or rejoice at her narrow escape. He settled for simply waiting; he would have plenty of time later to do whatever seemed appropriate.

Kitarak and Yoncalla arrived just before dark. Jedra heard them coming before he saw them. The former immortal was evidently less than pleased with his new body; he cursed a steady streak of unfamiliar epithets as they worked their way through the uneven terrain, and Kitarak occasionally said things like, "It was the best body I could get you at the time." and "Be glad I didn't put you into a kank."

Jedra stretched out his senses into the gathering gloom. There was Kitarak, all right, just beyond the hill, and Yoncalla beside him, but Jedra felt no trace of Lothar, the dwarf whose body the immortal now wore. Evidently his mind had not returned when Kitarak had revived his body.

The tohr-kreen rounded the flank of the hill. "Ah, there you are," he said. "And Kayan as well, in both her separate states. Good." He walked up to Jedra and extended a lower hand. "It is good to see you again. Many belated thanks for your rescue, and my apology for taking so long to return the favor."

"Just so long as you can revive her," Jedra said, squeezing the tohr-kreen's chitinous claw.

"If she made it into the crystal as I directed her to, then I can."

Yoncalla came stumping up on his short legs, panting for breath, and said, “Don’t sound so smug about it, bug-face. You’re good, but you didn’t exactly solve all *my* problems.” He looked Jedra up and down and said, “You could, though. That’s a decent body you’ve got. I’ll take it.”

“You will do no such thing,” Kitarak said. To Jedra he said, “Don’t worry. I taught him our language and how to mindspeak, but I didn’t teach him how to transfer himself from body to body.”

“He’s afraid I’ll get loose and take over all of Athas again,” Yoncalla said. He shook his head sorrowfully and added, “Not that I’d want this sorry excuse for a world. You certainly weren’t exaggerating when you described it to me, were you boy?”

“Um, no,” Jedra said, uncomfortable with speaking to the immortal in a body he’d seen killed two weeks earlier. To Kitarak he said, “I would have thought he’d know how to make the transfer already.”

Kitarak shook his head. “The people of his time knew how to store the mind in specially made crystals, but it was tinkercraft, not psionics, that allowed them to do it, and they never mastered the reverse process. You need psionics to merge the mind with the body again.”

“You mean there’s actually something we can do better now than the ancients could?” Jedra asked incredulously.

“Don’t be deceived by appearances,” Kitarak said. “Progress never stops entirely, even in the midst of degeneration. We may not be as civilized as the ancients, but our medical abilities are far better than anything available before.”

Yoncalla snorted. “That depends on your point of view. Your precious psionic medicine made me a dwarf.” To Jedra he said, “What do you want for it?”

“What?” Jedra asked.

“Your body. If I can’t take it, then I’ll buy it from you. How much do you want?”

Jedra blushed, as if the immortal had suggested something indecent, as indeed he might have. The concept was too new for Jedra to know for sure,

but the very idea seemed revolting. “It’s not for sale,” he said. “*I’m* not for sale.”

“Sure you are,” Yoncalla said. “Everybody has a price.”

Jedra couldn’t imagine enough wealth to make him trade his own body for a dwarf’s. But some people might. And others—maybe even Yoncalla—would no doubt murder for a new body. What kind of nightmare were they about to loose on this already-grim world? Jedra said to Kitarak, “I’m just beginning to realize how dangerous this thing we’ve discovered is. Maybe we should bury these crystals back in the rubble where we found them.” *And Yoncalla with them*, he added psionically, so the immortal couldn’t hear him.

“Before we revive Kayan?” Kitarak asked. When Jedra spluttered for an answer, he said, “Your moral objection rests on shaky ground, doesn’t it?”

It did at that. Could Jedra deny everyone else the opportunity to escape death after he had used the knowledge to rescue his love? Not and remain the kind of person he wanted to be. But neither could he let Kayan spend the rest of eternity imprisoned in a crystal, knowing he could save her.

“Of course we should revive Kayan,” Jedra said. “She’s counting on us. But nobody else knows this ability exists. Maybe we should keep it that way.”

Yoncalla laughed. “Impossible, boy. I tried to suppress life-defiling magic, and look at how much success I had.” He waved his arms to encompass the barren hillside.

Kitarak turned his head so a faceted eye faced Yoncalla. “Your people were responsible for this?”

“Uh... indirectly,” Yoncalla said nervously.

“You will tell me about it. I and many others are still trying to repair the damage you did.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Yoncalla protested. “I tried to stop it. It was—”

“Wait a minute,” Jedra said. “Let’s revive Kayan first. Then we can save the world.”

“You are right,” Kitarak said. “First things first.” He bent down over Kayan and placed all four hands on her body. A soft blue glow spread from them into her, and her slack muscles began to tighten again. The ugly red wound over her heart closed, and the color came back to her skin. “Good,” Kitarak said. “She prepared for this. She stopped her body’s life processes before you did, so your sword wound merely caused local damage. The rest of her is still fine.” He continued running his hands back and forth over her, coaxing her body into life again. Finally she shuddered once all over, and her chest began to rise and fall with regular breaths.

“There,” said Kitarak proudly. “She is ready. You may enter the crystal and retrieve her.”

Jedra nodded. He felt a certain reluctance after what had happened to him before in the crystals, but his desire to see Kayan again—and to rescue her if she was in danger—was far stronger. “It may take me a while to find her,” he said, “but if we don’t come out soon, you’d better come after us. We may be in trouble.”

Yoncalla said, “You fear another mad immortal?”

Jedra looked at him. Even in a dwarf body, the immortal looked smug. The wild look in his eyes made him appear a little crazy yet, too.

“You learn to fear everything in this world,” Jedra said. He fingered the crystal around his neck. “Even the other worlds within it.”

Yoncalla laughed. “The storage crystals follow the rules of their creators,” he said. “This one may be completely different from the ones you have visited before.”

“That’s encouraging,” Jedra said. He lay down on the ground so his body wouldn’t topple over when he lost conscious control of it, and he concentrated on the crystal. He tried to mindlink with it, pushing at the barrier between himself and Kayan until it eventually gave way.

* * *

He found himself in a brightly lit forest. Not as bright as Yoncalla's world, but the sunlight streaming through the wide leaves was brighter than the reddish glow that fell on Athas. It made yellow streaks in the mist that rose from the damp ground, ground on which a thick carpet of deep green moss grew. Jedra took a couple steps and felt it compress beneath his feet, giving him a springy, almost jaunty gait that made him smile even though he still held himself alert for trouble.

He heard water flowing nearby. Water, and a voice raised in song. Kayan's voice. Jedra walked toward her beneath the trees, bouncing with each step, until he came to the edge of the stream. He stood atop a short cliff above a wide pool; it was maybe ten feet straight down to the water. And in that pool, glowing in the unfiltered sunlight, floated Kayan. The water was perfectly clear; Jedra could see the surface only by the waves Kayan made as she swept her arms out in front of her and scissored her legs lazily, pulling herself slowly through it. Her armor and underclothing lay in a pile on a flat rock a few feet upstream from Jedra.

"Hello!" he called to her, surprised that he could speak with such a sight before him.

She flinched, sending a big ripple out in a ring around her. Then she looked up and said, "You came for me."

"I did."

"Come on the rest of the way," she said, grinning mischievously.

"Into the water?" Jedra looked for a path down to the edge of the pool, but he saw none. The pool itself looked far deeper than he was tall; Kayan seemed to be floating just fine in it, but he had no assurance that he would fare as well. "I'll come to the edge for you," he said. "How do I get down there?"

"Jump," she said. "It's all or nothing in this world."

"Oh? You've explored it?"

"I did better than that. I made it."

"You *made* it? How?"

She leaned back in the water and pushed herself along with her hands. Swirls of light and shadow played across her body as she moved. “It was empty when I got here,” she said. “Dark, with nothing to stand on. So I wished for a sun, and ground, and when I got that I wished for the rest. Do you like it?”

Jedra pulled his eyes away from her long enough to take in the stream flowing over the rocks at the head of the pool, the trees with their long branches full of wide, parasol leaves, and now that he looked for them, the birds flitting from branch to branch. “like it?” he asked. “It’s beautiful. I can’t believe I’m wearing this whole thing around my neck.”

He looked back at Kayan, who had turned over and now pushed herself along on her stomach with gentle kicks of her legs. “Me, either,” she said.

Jedra felt uncomfortable watching her suspended in the clear water, with so much seeming emptiness below. “Aren’t you afraid of falling to the bottom?” he asked her.

She laughed. “The water holds me up. I don’t know if this is something I made up too, or if I could do this out in the real world, but either way it’s fun. Come on, try it.” She stopped pushing herself through the water and beckoned to him with both hands.

Jedra didn’t wait to be invited a third time. He untied his armor and dropped it on the moss, stripped off his loincloth, and with a scream of animal excitement he leaped out into the air over the pool. He felt a moment of pure panic while he hurtled downward, and he instinctively tucked his legs up under himself and held them with his arms. He hit the water with enough force to go completely under, but he bobbed back to the surface a moment later and gasped for breath.

Just in time for Kayan to splash another face-full of water on him.

“Hey!” he yelled, windmilling his arms in an attempt to stay afloat. The water was cool against his bare skin.

“Hey, yourself,” she said, giggling and splashing him again.

She was doing it on purpose. Well, two could play that game. Jedra could hardly see through his wet eyes, but he slapped the water in her

direction and was rewarded with a scream of surprise. She splashed him again, but he protected his eyes with his arm this time. She was close; when he saw a white leg shimmer beneath the water he held his breath while he ducked under and caught it, then tugged her under with him.

They both bobbed to the surface again, but this time Jedra reached up and took her in his arms, drawing her close to him. They eyed one another from inches away, both grinning now, and Jedra said, “Kiss me or I’ll pull you under again.”

“If you don’t kick your legs, you’ll—yeow!” They bobbed back beneath the surface before she could finish, but Jedra got the idea. He let her go and began to scissor his legs and move his arms back and forth the way he’d seen her do, and this time when they bobbed back to the surface, their heads stayed above water.

Kayan leaned forward and kissed him anyway. “I love you,” she murmured.

“And I love you,” Jedra said.

She closed her eyes. “I think that’s the first time you’ve ever said that to me.”

“I’ve said it hundreds of times,” he told her. “Just not with words.”

“I suppose you have,” she said. She grinned again and moved closer, brushing her body against his. “You want to say it again?”

* * *

Later, after the cool water had drained all the heat from their bodies and they had climbed up the bank to soak up sunlight on the flat rock where Kayan’s clothing lay, Jedra said, “Kitarak is probably getting worried about us. I hate to leave, but if we don’t go out soon, he’ll come in after us.”

Kayan laughed. “I’d love to toss him in the water, too, but I suppose that can wait for later. Let’s go see what he’s done to my poor body.”

Jedra winced. “*I’m* the one who did the damage. He’s the one who fixed it.”

Kayan squeezed Jedra’s hand. “You did the only thing you could to save both of us. Don’t torture yourself about it. Just don’t make a habit of it, either, all right?”

Jedra smiled weakly. “All right.”

“So then, let’s go.”

“How do we get out of here?”

“Hmm. I hadn’t thought of that. This is my world; I suppose we could do it just about any way we want. How about... hmm.” She stood up and walked across the springy moss to the base of a tree, grasped the stub of a broken-off branch that stuck out at waist level, and pulled on it. An oval door swung outward, revealing a dark interior sprinkled with stars. Kayan held out her hand. “This way.”

Jedra got up and walked over to her. When he took her hand, she stepped through the doorway in the tree, and when he took the single step to follow her he felt a moment of disorientation and found himself lying on the ground on the hillside again. He sat up and looked over at Kayan, now little more than a shadow in the deepening night.

Kayan? he asked.

Here.

He was glad he was sitting on the ground; the relief that flooded through him would have sent him there anyway. He took Kayan’s shoulders in his hands and pulled her up, holding her to him in a fierce hug. Their armor got in the way—it had never been removed in the real world—but he didn’t care. He was holding the real Kayan, whole once again.

Kitarak stood beside them, his faceted eyes reflecting starlight. “Well,” he said when their hug showed no sign of ending soon, “are you all right?”

Kayan leaned back away from Jedra and patted herself on the sides and chest. “Everything feels like it’s in the right place,” she said.

“That’s more than I can say,” Yoncalla said. He was sitting on a rock with his chin in his hands, his elbows propped on his knees.

“You can always go back into your crystal if you’d rather,” Kitarak told him.

“No,” Yoncalla said quickly, lifting his head. “Not that. This body isn’t mine, and this world isn’t paradise, but at least it’s real.”

“You should try the world Kayan made,” Jedra said, reaching up to the crystal at his neck. “It’s beautiful.”

Kayan shrugged. “Actually, it’s a lot like yours. I made the water a little warmer so I could get into it and pull myself around with my hands, but otherwise I just copied a stream and a pool like I’d already seen in your world.”

“Swimming,” the immortal said.

“What?”

“You were swimming. I do it all the time. Or did. I don’t suppose there’s enough water to fill a bathtub in this world anymore.”

“Bathtub?” Jedra asked.

Kayan laughed. “We still have them in the palace.”

Yoncalla didn’t smile. “When I ruled here, even the peasants had bathtubs. And water flowed in mighty rivers over the surface of the land.”

Kitarak said, “Many of us have dedicated our lives to bringing those days back to Athas. You would be a powerful addition to our team, since you know firsthand what we are trying to re-create.”

“Not in a dwarf’s body, I won’t,” Yoncalla said.

Kitarak rasped his arms against his thorax in agitation. “I will try to find you something better,” he said, “but I will not become a necromancer for your benefit.”

“There are plenty of bodies left over from every gladiator game,” Yoncalla said, “like that big elf who fought so well. Why didn’t you get me a body like his?”

A sudden chill ran down Jedra’s spine. “What big elf?” he asked. “Not Sahalik?”

“Was that his name?” Yoncalla said. “I wasn’t paying much attention until after I saw how good he was. If he hadn’t slipped in a pool of blood, he would probably have won.”

Jedra looked to Kitarak. “Was it Sahalik?”

Kitarak nodded his insectile head. “I’m sorry. He fought gloriously, but as Yoncalla said, he slipped, and...”

“And he’s dead? Just like that?”

“That is the way of the world,” Kitarak said. “At least for now. Perhaps in time, if we succeed in bringing back the riches we once had, we can use these crystals to conquer death for everyone, but unfortunately we were too late for Sahalik.”

Jedra sank back to the ground. Sahalik couldn’t be dead. He was too mean to die. Mean and cocky and self-confident—and lately, at least to Jedra, compassionate as well. And he was next in line to be chief.

“What about the Jura-Dai?” Jedra asked. “What will become of them?”

Kitarak shook his head. “Life in the desert is unpredictable. They may survive to become a great tribe once again, or they may not, but their story is their own. Our future lies down a different path.”

“Does it?” Kayan asked. “And what path is that?”

Kitarak swiveled his head toward her. “Am I making an unwarranted assumption? I had thought that you would join us in our attempt to transform Athas into paradise again. With a little more training, you could be among our most powerful allies yet.”

“Could we, now?” Kayan asked teasingly. To Jedra, she mindsent, *What do you think? Is that what you want to do?*

He could sense her eagerness. She was taunting Kitarak just for the fun of it, but she wanted what he offered. Even though she could retreat to her own private paradise whenever she wished, she wanted to bring it about in the real world instead. And so, Jedra realized, did he. He wanted more than just a pretty world; he wanted to upset the system of sorcerer-kings and templars and nobles and the abuse of power that led to slaves and lovers fighting in the gladiatorial arena for others’ entertainment. He wanted to

build a whole new society where nobody lacked food or shelter, and where everyone had a chance to succeed at whatever they wanted to do.

Sure I want to, he replied. More than anything else. Except spend the rest of my life with you, of course.

That could be a long time, if we use these crystals of yours, Kayan said. Are you sure you mean that?

I'm sure. He drew her toward him and kissed her. He knew their lives would not be perfect from here on out. Kayan had once told him that there were no happily-ever-afters in this world, and he had seen enough to understand the wisdom in the elves' credo, "Hope for the best but expect the worst, that way all your surprises will be pleasant." But for just an instant as they kissed, there in the desert with their mentor once again at their sides and their future dedicated to a worthy cause, all the cares of the world vanished in an eternal moment of glory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Hughes is the pen name for Jerry Oltion, a science-fiction writer whose short stories appear regularly in *Analog*, the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and various anthologies. His novels include *Frame of Reference* and two books in Isaac Asimov's Robot City series, *Alliance* and *Humanity*. His short-story collection, *Love Songs of a Mad Scientist*, was recently published by Hypatia Press.

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